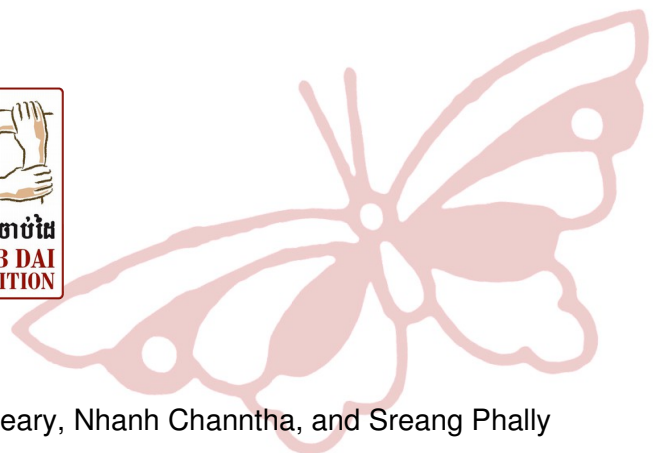# Butterfly Methodology Change

A Reflection Paper

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Siobhan Miles, Heang Sophal, Lim Vanntheary, Nhanh Channtha, and Sreang Phally

THE BUTTERFLY LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH PROJECT

A Chab Dai Study on (Re-) integration
Researching the Lifecycle of Survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

By Siobhan Miles, Heang Sophal, Lim Vanntheary,
Nhanh Channtha, and Sreang Phally

Siobhan Miles is Research Manager/Researcher of The Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project for the Chab Dai Coalition. She holds and B.Sc. in Nursing from Seattle Pacific University, a MSc in Nursing from The University of California, San Francisco, Certificates of Family Nurse Practitioner and Physician's Assistant for the University of California, Davis. She is currently an MPhil candidate at OCMS, University of Middlesex, UK.

Heang Sophal is an Assistant Project Manager/Researcher of the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project, and holds a B.A. in Archaeology from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. She is currently a M.A candidate in Development Studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Lim Vanntheary is a Researcher of the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project, holds Bachelor Degrees of Art in Sociology and Education in English from the Royal University of in Phnom Penh. She is currently a M.A candidate in Development Studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Nhanh Channtha is a Researcher of the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project, holds Bachelor Degrees of Art in Sociology from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanity, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Sreang Phally is a Research Administrator/Researcher of the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project. He holds a Bachelor Degree of Art in Sociology from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanity, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Background

Whilst there have been some cross-sectional and retrospective studies about (re-) integration of survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking, there has been a paucity of longitudinal studies focusing on this issue (Dedace 2008; Derks 1998; Reimer 2007; Velazco 2011). The Butterfly project is the first longitudinal re-integration research in the world seeking to follow a cohort[1] of sexually exploited/trafficked children and adults over a ten-year period. It is an ambitious project undertaken in a complex and often challenging context.

The Butterfly project is the result of a collaborative response by predominantly Chab Dai anti-trafficking agencies in Cambodia who have been working with victim/survivors of sexual exploitation for nearly two decades (Delaney and Scarff 2010; Derks 2006). Over the years, these agencies and assistance programs have expressed their desire to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, particularly in terms of their clients' long-term (re-) integration experiences.

The core objectives of this research include:

- ➢ Explore the perceptions and experiences of a cohort of victim/ survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking about their lives and (re-) integration experiences.
- ➢ Facilitate Local Annual Round Table Discussions, Forums and Workshops with anti-trafficking partners and stakeholders on themes and findings.
- ➢ Provide specific confidential feedback to partner organizations, as needed and requested.
- ➢ Disseminate the findings of publications to broad audiences of practitioners, programmers, policy makers, government bodies and academics.

It is anticipated dissemination of this cohort's perceptions and experiences will contribute to local, regional and global Anti-trafficking and (Re-) integration discourse. The research

commenced in 2010 and at this five-year midway point it is appropriate to reflect on the design approach and methodology in terms of limitations and lessons learned.

Longitudinal research design and methodology

In order to define what is meant by longitudinal design, it is helpful to distinguish how it is similar and different from cross-sectional research. Cross-sectional designs involve the collection of data on more than one case and at a single point in time(Bryman 2008). In contrast longitudinal designs involve: '(a) collecting data for each item or variable for (at least) two or more distinct time periods; (b) analysing the same or at least comparable subjects or cases from one period to the next; and (c) analysing data which involves some comparison between or among periods' (Menard 2002, p:2). In both designs, unlike experiments that manipulate variables, researchers in these studies simply collect data relating to the variables (Thomas 2009). A major weakness of cross-sectional design is a limited understanding of causal processes that occur over time, because the data is only collected at one point in time (Bryman 2008; Rajulton 2001). In contrast, one of the major strengths of the longitudinal design over that of cross-sectional design is the potential for stronger conclusions concerning causal relationships among variables because data is collected over time (Taris 2003).

As described earlier, there are different types of longitudinal designs: one design is the *prospective panel,* and this involves interviewing the same people over time. Another approach is the *repeated cross-sectional,* and this involves collecting data on different people (though similar and comparable) within a specific subpopulation over at least two points in time (Babbie 2007; Bryman 2008; Menard, 2002). The Butterfly research uses the prospective panel design approach.

When the design of the study is to follow the same people over a period of time, 'attrition' or retention is a challenge that needs to be anticipated, considered and mitigated (Babbie 2007; Bentancourt et al. 2012; Boothby et al. 2006; Marsden et al. 2003; Menard 2002; Rajulton 2001; Thomas 2009). Contact with the participants and

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1 'A cohort is a group of people who share a common characteristic or experience' (Thomas 2009: p 130)

sustaining their motivation is difficult and costly (Rajulton 2001). In prospective panel longitudinal research looking at the (re-) integration of child soldiers, Bentacourt et al. (2012) and Boothby et al. (2006) described 'attrition' as a major challenge and limitation. Betancourt followed former child soldier cohort (n=260) over a six-year period and had retention rate of 69% whilst Boothby et al. (2006) followed 39 reintegrating child soldiers over a 16-year period and at the end had 23 original participants remaining in the study. Bearing in mind the need to prevent 'attrition' and sensing the Butterfly cohort (n=128) [2]were very mobile, the team decided to interview participants three times per year during the initial years of the study. This schedule enabled participants to become familiar with the team. The retention rate was 84% in 2012 (Miles et al. 2012) and 76% in 2013 (Miles et al 2013).[3]

The Butterfly project, like any other professional and rigorous study, upholds the ethic that participant participation is voluntary. Voluntary participation means participants have the right to leave the study at any time. Therefore from the beginning the team has sought to maintain contact with participants in order that they can continue to choose whether or not they want to continue in the study (Marsden et al. 2007). Practically this has involved maintaining the database on the participants' most current whereabouts and being available by phone for contact 24/7. The most common reasons for attrition have been due to losing contact with participants either because they have moved or not forwarded their new address, they have migrated out of the country, or they have changed or lost their phones. When participants have told us they wanted to leave the study, the team informed them they would be welcomed back if they changed their minds at a later date. Though some participants have left the study, the team believe retention is largely due to participants trusting that their identities will be kept confidential, their stories matter and they are valued as individuals.

Another challenge of prospective panel design is a

phenomenon referred to as 'panel conditioning.' 'Panel conditioning' refers to the increased potential that participants will respond in a habitual manner to questions they have grown familiar to being asked and/or that they will become less inclined to report 'socially unacceptable' situations because they fear being disapproved of by the researchers (Rajulton 2001).The team anticipated these challenges from the beginning and have sought to communicate in a non-judgemental and accepting manner toward all participants, particularly toward those who have decided to return to sex work or high-risk situations such as working in entertainment venues (massage parlours, karaoke, beer gardens and brothels) and potentially dangerous endeavours such as migrating to Thailand illegally.

One question to consider in the design of a longitudinal study is determining how often it will be necessary to measure the variables of interest in order to capture change in the process under study (Thomas 2009). Rajulton (2001) warns that it is possible to obtain measures that suggest change occurred when actually no change occurred at all, or measures that suggest there had been no change, when actually a change occurred. Related to the issue of 'measuring change', the team has consciously grappled with their own hopes and assumptions participants will 'do well' or 'progress.' According to Brenner, who conducted longitudinal research with formerly trafficked people in the USA, found that their lives were characterized by 'social, cultural and economic vulnerabilities' (Basu et al. 2014 p21). Similarly in the Butterfly study, participants experience complex, difficult and pressing problems. Some of their issues include dealing with their past traumas in contexts which often stigmatize and blame them, ill health, cultural expectations, responsibilities toward family, violent relationships, financial insecurities and limited job opportunities.

Each year, an increasing number of participants have expressed they 'trust' the research team because they feel cared for, as individuals (Gair 2012) and that confidentiality will be maintained. They explain this is therapeutic because it allows them to safely talk about their perceptions and experiences. Based on this evolving trust, some have stated they feel they are able to disclose

2 In 2011, the study remained open for the duration of the year in to achieve a cohort size of 128, 80% female and 20% male (Miles et al 2011).

3 At the time of this paper, the retention % rate has not yet been determined for 2014.

'more' truthful accounts about their lives. Whilst the team have welcomed this phenomenon, at times their later accounts appear to contradict their earlier stories. A few examples of these evolving and sometimes contradictory accounts include ethnicity, age (not progressing year to year), abortions, pregnancies, and complex relationships with intimate partners and family, past and on-going experiences of trauma and exploitation etc.

Methodology

With the intent and objective of hearing the 'voice' of participants, the Butterfly research has used a mixed method approach with a number of different methods over the past five years. The mixed method approach has allowed the team to establish a broad overview of participants' lives. The team has used survey tools, which combined asking both closed and open-ended questions. The team has also utilized a number of qualitative data collecting activities such as focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, play, art projects and participant observation. In addition, the team has conducted phone interviews with participants who have migrated to Thailand or who moved to remote inaccessible locations in Cambodia. Whilst recognizing the theoretical potential of a mixed method approach to triangulate qualitative and quantitative data (Hammersley 1996), the team has found combining numbered data with qualitative data to be problematic.

In considering how a mixed method approach has been problematic it is important to recognize the differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies and how this relates to trafficking research generally and to the Butterfly research specifically. Quantitative research essentially uses numbers to generalize findings through a representative sample. A representative sample firstly requires establishing the total number of participants under study. Globally, and in Cambodia, the total number of victims of sexual exploitation has never been determined due to the covert and hidden nature of sex work especially involving children (Derks 2006). At best there have been estimations of how many people have been exploited in this manner. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize any findings focusing on trafficking and reintegration because the total number of

victims of trafficking has been, and forever will be unknown. This fact is true for the Butterfly study in that the 'numbers' in our study are not in any way representative.

During the early years of the Butterfly study the team used three revolving open and closed survey questionnaires each year broadly focusing on different areas of their lives. Though the surveys enabled the team to gain a broad understanding of their lives, the major limitation with the survey numbers was the 'inter-year missing data'. 'Inter-year missing' data occurred when a participant missed an interview visit, though they continue in the study. Inter-year missing numbered data means the remaining numbered data cannot be merged from year to year. In addition these 'numbers' have not explained the deeper and more nuanced stories and experiences of the participants and nor have they captured the complexities and apparent contradictions of participants' evolving disclosure.

The Way Forward

In the light of the overall purpose of this research, which is to listen to the perspectives and experiences of victim/survivors, the team believes at this point in the study a stronger focus on a qualitative approach is more appropriate for capturing the nuances and complexity of people's lives. Therefore, whilst initially the study utilized a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) approach, in subsequent years the Butterfly team will focus more on qualitative methods and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the upcoming Round Table Discussion this year, the Butterfly team will dialogue with partners about some of the potential themes, questions and case studies they would like to see explored in future themed papers. Some possible areas for themed papers and case studies of participants' views and experiences include: relationships; physical and mental health issues; family planning; sexual health; evolving truth, disclosure and 'trust;' what is known about those who 'escaped' or left programs; violence; drugs and alcohol; stigma and discrimination; honor and respect; drugs and alcohol misuse; employment and education; push/pull factors to return to sex work; declined assistance; economics and debt; migration; land

eviction, male survivors; filial piety; skills and education; parenting; 'justice' and exploitation etc. The themed paper for 2014 looks at perceptions and experiences of 'Success and Resilience.'

The team feels each participant is unique and on a journey and it continues to be a privilege to listen to their perceptions and experiences. Their lives and stories matter and have the potential to positively affect programming and future generations of victim/survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

If you would like to access any of our reports and themed papers please visit
http://freedomcollaborative.org/library_items/154

www.chabdai.org

Cover photo- Siobhan Miles

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