

# **Power and Resistance: The Untold Stories in the Context of a Local Health Office**

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## **Background and Rationale**

Medical and public health work under the context of overly bureaucratic systems can affect both workers' level of devotion and compassion in a significant way. In 1998, there was the worst scandal of corruption in several health organizations under the Thai Ministry of Public Health. The accused was in the procurement of medicines that came from the order of high rank official in the Ministry of Public Health. The study of Komart Chuengsathiensub (2003: 85) pointed out this problem by referring to the selling of ranks/offices together with the organization's culture itself were the most serious parts of a cycle of corruption. He found that subordinates acted as a docile bodies, kowtowed to power, acted like idiots or just ignored to illegitimated actions.

Somehow power can also gives rise to resistance. Individuals have their own agency (active not passive) and the power to fight back against the dominant power even if they have little chance to win. To understand power we can also learn from those who oppose power.

## **Research Objective**

The objective is to study the patterns of "the exercise of power" and "alternative action" (whether a docile body or an opposing /resisting of such power) in the context of a local health office under the bureaucratic system through the meanings given by those officials who experienced power domination.

## Methodology

The study design for study power and resistance is basically an “autoethnography” as it is founded primarily upon my own narratives and my interpretation of the narratives of my co-researchers. This method link personal narratives to cultural and political context. It rejects the idea that sociology must be “without value” or “knowledge without emotion”. Thus it is a combination of social psychology and postmodernism. As a result, such a sociology can take into account the emotions and shared feelings of the researcher. This “narrative story” will attempt to represent the facts in as fair manner as possible, yet, in places, it will also be colored with the participants’ emotions and feelings in order to inspire the mind of the reader. The narratives included my work experience, reflect on some key problems, and then apply the principles that I had identified to help analyze the experience of my co-researchers (Mr.Somchai, Ms.Wanaporn and Ms.Aod - pseudonyms). All of this takes into account my feeling as well.

Narration can create a feeling of continuity or coherence as the story unfolds and smoothly “flows” out. I did not express either agreement nor disagreement while listening to their narratives. I wanted to give my co-researchers a forum to voice their feelings about their predicament and the fact that they were discriminated against or accused of being “others” in their own society.

## Key Findings of the Study

The four narratives reflect different forms of exercising power, authority, and resistance that occurred in the everyday work of bureaucrats in a local public health office. The narrators disclosed (1) how they were abused by their superior’s use of authority, (2) what meanings they gave towards the incidents, and (3) what techniques were used in facing up to the situation.

## 1. Pattern of power

### 1.1 *Imperative control by “Authoritative Command”*

For my story, I was appointed to the committee to accept fake donations of medical supplies. When I refused to approve a purchase of expensive medicines from an illegal retailer, I was fearful that the boss would somehow treat me badly in return. My self-confidence in doing the right thing without fear, which used to be my strong point, was shaken in the new context of authoritative power of the fourth boss.

In Wannaporn's story, she shows how she was psychologically abused by *Nai Si* when he was deputy to *Nai Song*, just because she refused to do what *Nai Si* wanted her to do. She described her experience in this way:

*“Everyone under him [the fourth boss] had to “luu lom” [follow his orders like a tree blown by the wind]. I went against his will because it was the right thing to do. I would not be like this if I had only obeyed him. But if I had been “luu lom” I also would have gotten hurt. I could not do anything against my own belief. It was not the right thing for me. If it is five, it cannot be ten. Five is five. Ten is ten. And you will not say five is ten because it is not.”*

As we can see power exercised through the authoritative command comes in two forms: written, as a formal order, and oral, as an informal order. The formal forms refers to rules and regulations of command such as the appointment of a steering committee, an audit committee, or an official transfer. Samples of this exercise of power can be found in the narratives.

### 1.2 *Imperative control and interference in work*

In Somchai's narrative, the 100% toilet project for the village was at first rejected by *Nai Si*. After Somchai himself had almost reached the project's goal, the work was transferred to Somchai's subordinate, who got credit for the project.

In my case, after argued with many orders of the boss, I was excluded from my normal work roles and responsibilities and transferred to a hospital that was unsuitable for my knowledge and skills. When I complained to my boss that I had no productive work to do in the hospital, he just said- "It's nothing to worry about. You get your salary from here (the Public Health Office) not from the hospital. If no work suits you, just do any kind of research you want." I was not allowed to transfer back to my previous position without any good reason.

Also in Wanaporn's case, her role and responsibility were decreased immediately after she criticized the boss's secretary, who had taken a construction payment check without informing Wanaporn who is in charge of responsibility.

Like some orders, as in Aod's case, were issued as a way to get revenge. Thus, Aod was transferred to a distant, hard-to-reach hospital and reassigned to a new job every time she got too familiar with her colleagues.

### ***1.3 Wielding power to create dependency***

A powerful authority figure can use his or her power to make subordinates dependent on his or her good will be either providing opportunities for promotion or threatening punishment. Thus, by both positive and negative use of power, an authority can diminish subordinates' freedom to make reasonable decisions. As Aod recalled what the director of the hospital pointed out, if he had to choose between the fourth boss and her, he would surely choose the fourth boss. Aod realized that was because she was able to provide neither benefits nor penalties, unlike the boss, who was in a position to do so.

Somchai referred to the abuse of power he experienced as "*dong*" (meaning being cut off from the possibility of career advancement). He was marginalized, given no responsibilities, and was replaced by the boss's sycophants for no good reason. Similar things also happened to Wanaporn, Aod, and me, who were victimized by the boss' abuse of authority and extended network of power. The important impact of these

events is not only the punishment itself and our own mistreatment, but also the precedent that our treatment must have set in the eyes of subordinates, who will take such abuse of power for granted as part of the life of a bureaucrat.

#### ***1.4 Power as knowledge and truth: from discourse to the game of truth***

In my experience, the effective exercising of power with the least possible resistance requires an “ingenious” application of power, in which a “made subject” is not even aware of his or her subjection to power. Thus, power can be used to create accepted knowledge and “truth.” By discursive practices such as *Junior/Senior*- junior should obey and give respect to senior. I remember being told, “You should promise him [the secretary general of the food and drug committee] to manage this matter... and if any problems occur we will deal with them later.” I learned the lesson that a subordinate should agree to do anything the boss asks and that any misgivings having to do with the law or regulations should be brought up with the boss very, very carefully. Somchai described his technique of dealing with the boss this way: “ However, I had to keep my dissatisfaction in my mine only. I had to politely reply... There are a lot of things I had to learn. You should not oppose him [the boss]. That would make him lose his face. When he loses face, he would dislike you more.”

Wanaporn’s brother was questioned by the deputy of the fourth boss about the compliant against the fourth boss “Do you know that your sister (Wanaporn) submitted a complaint against the boss? Look! How dare she do this. How can she make an accusation against the boss?”

*We/They* – inequality treated according to the discrimination among the official.

The fourth boss told me, “I will care for my people first,” I learned that for him people were separated into groups depending on whether they were in favor or not. In Somchai’s narrative, he was informed by a Deputy Permanent Secretary that the fourth boss wanted to promote his men to take Somchai’s position. It was confirmed that there was nothing wrong with Somchai’s performance; rather, it was because he is not “the boss’ men”.

Wanaporn noted, “public administration is a partisan system... In the end, there were only his people.” Wanaporn felt that she had become a “stranger” who was not counted as a member of her workplace society. She said “The question was whether it would have been considered a mistake if one of his people had done it.” Wanaporn wondered about this when she was punished by the fourth boss because his followers were not punished although their faults were evident.

*Normality* – As the boss ordered me to purchase expensive medicines from an illegal drug company detailer just like others and some even “purchase” without receiving the medicines. Somchai was commanded to “zigzag” which is normal to avoid the rules and regulations. Those who argue will be considered as “abnormal” or “trouble maker”. The exchange benefit is “*sawat dikan*” not “corruption,” because it is used for the benefit of the office in general. It is normal that a big business must be shown deference when an official inspects his factory. A person within the network of a politician should be shown special consideration and deference.

By the *Games of truth* (the powerful authority is in the privileged position to construct the *truth game*) – The subordinate was forced to “play” within the existing context of games. In the process of “objectification” - subordinate being an object defined by the superior. And by the “subjectification” the subordinate will aware of themselves as being defined, how he/she should behave such as a “*slave to the master-boss*”, a “*disgusting person*”, “*unwanted subject*”, or “*the other*” unfitted to the community you used to live. Aod faced it when she befriended a nurse who had been targeted by the director for “unnecessarily” asking about the welfare money (*sawat dikan*) of the hospital. Wanaporn was also turned out by her colleagues and even her relatives when she was labeled the boss’ opponent, nobody treated her as before. Somchai was isolated in the little room. Aod said she felt like she was treated as a skunk, “everyone was afraid to talk to me. A janitor mopping the floor glanced at me like I was a monster or a troublesome person.”

We were isolated from the community and new perceptions were created about us. Everyone avoided talking to us because they were afraid of being labeled as

“one of them.” We were targets of surveillance for any little infraction that could lead to further punishment. It was, as Wanaporn said, “Everything can become a problem...They investigated me for everything, trying to find any single mistake.”

*Power creates “truth” via the mechanism of the committee*

Powerless victims always get blamed and punished while the privileged are never held accountable. Aod mentioned about the amnesty granted to the accused boss from the ministry. Wanaporn and Aod, on the other hand, were investigated for many supposed transgressions. And no matter how they tried to seek justice and a fair hearing of their grievances and there was never any satisfactory response.

*Technique of discipline as control and punishment*

Power can also be exercised through a technique of discipline which becomes an efficient tool for punishing the targeted person. We were targets of surveillance for any little infraction that could lead to further punishment. It was, as Wanaporn said, “Everything can become a problem...They investigated me for everything, trying to find any single mistake.”

From the four narratives, we have four theme of power manifest in forms of imperative command of the superior, control and interfere in work, power wield to create dependency, and power as discourse and the game of truth. By which the narrator view as abused of power of the superior’ authority.

## **2. The meaning of exercising power**

Bureaucrats in general think that “the boss is big” and has a right to exercise his power which should not be challenged. By the language used to address him, that is, normally, “*Nai*” (meaning master). So the boss’ power can dominate and control the everyday life of subordinate work. But power must be used ethically otherwise, it will diminish due to lack of compliance.

Participants in the study all noted that power is wielded to gain the economic and political benefits, that is, to help the executive’s allies gain advantage by hindering

others from getting ahead. The exercise of power can be viewed as an attempt to decrease the dignity, value, and credibility of the person who is targeted for abuse. Such abuse destroys not only the social capital that a person has built up over his or her career but also his or her dignity and self-respect. One said "...do not look at us like little rats while you think you are a lion. That is nonsense. Everyone is equal. It is a simple matter to show respect for each other."

Within the limitation of specific information provided through their stories, it can be seen that this organization had an internal conflict among management personnel in the past. Officials were discriminated against and relied on a patron-client relationship with the boss. Wanaporn believed that she was abused by the fourth boss because she knew too much, did not follow all his commands and having been marked as one of the boss' opponents. Aod also believed what happened to her by the boss was purposeful harassment and long-term revenge.

### **3. Patterns of resistance in the organizational context**

Within the context of the office in question, resistance occurred both in front of and behind the backs of those in power. Some officials decided to surrender and bide their time until a chance to respond presented itself. In addition, there was an attempt to create a knowledge base as a fighting tool for the weaker side to use when there was no alternative but to strike back. Not surrendering to power indicates that each individual has his or her own power to be an active subject capable of resistance and not just a passive and docile subject. The degree of violence in resistance can reflect the exercise of power in this organization as well. The four narratives affirm that power can be challenged and resisted at any time. Individuals can decide on their own what they should do in a given situation;

#### ***3.1 Agreeing to do something, then failing to do so***

To politely acknowledging a boss's order without argument but not actually carry out is one of the gestures. If the boss follows up and asks about the result, the

person pretends that he forgot the order and apologizes politely. This quiet resistance may annoy the boss, but it does not make him lose face. The ignorance keeps on going until the boss is sick of following up on that job. This is a pattern of concealed resistance.

### ***3.2 Evasion and negotiation***

Resistance can also be in the form of negotiation or gentle evasion using various reasons to support an opposing argument based on relevant rules and regulations. For example, I cited a regulation concerning the quota for drugstores or tried to avoid approving the “fake donation,” Somchai used to ask for the written order from the boss. Negotiation for an exchange benefit; Somchai signed for the purchase of 200 liters of petrol in exchange that the district chief officer approve his request for 30 liters of petrol for a dengue fever protection project.

### ***3.3 Gossip***

Gossiping is the easiest way to get others to focus on the negative side of other people. The information may be true or false. Some fiction may be added for excitement and interest. It is a kind of resistance that avoids face-to-face encounters with authority. However, the inside context is also important. Gossip often reaches the ears of the authority because he may assign one of his people to infiltrate the general staff. We are accused by the boss of gossiping about him.

### ***3.4 Anonymous letter***

An “anonymous letter” is a concrete form of resistance and often used because it is rather safe. It is generally used to make public negative stories that happened in the public administration of an authority. Wanaporn was accused of writing an anonymous letter to the ministry to complain about the fourth boss.

### **3.5 *Objection and face-to-face argument***

Face-to-face confrontation with one's boss happens when a subordinate is forced to do something and there is no way to sidestep the issue or compromise. Somchai objected the approval an uncompleted water system project. I refused to dispense the medical supplies' donation and rejected a purchase of medicine from an illegal company. Aod could not escape a face-to-face confrontation with the hospital director who kept on issuing commands to move her around the hospital and kept nitpicking over minor faults. All her patience and endurance were gone, replaced by pain and resentment.

### **3.6 *Signed complaint***

Sending a signed compliant to the agency makes one reveal oneself and take full responsibility for the veracity of the complaint. It is like declaration of war for the desperate powerless. Wanaporn interpreted her struggle by comparing herself to *moo mai kua nam ron* (a pig that is not scared of hot water) or a *ma jon trok* (a cornered dog that cannot avoid fighting). Although she knew it would be painful, she was afraid no more and accepted the possibility of negative repercussions. Aod also struggled to help herself with patience and an indomitable spirit. She submitted complaints to every agency that should have been able to help. She explained that the systems could not work because of money politics.

### **3.7 *Handbills and Hyde Park***

Handbills were distributed to public when the fourth boss enter politics. The content shamed and discredited him. Wanaporn shared her memory regarding the content of a handbill sent to her. It was written about the boss' private business. Aod led her supporters in a Hyde Park type public address at the Ministry of Public Health in order to try to get rid of the fourth boss. This strategy finally worked because it was covered on television news and she was interviewed on TV.

### ***3.8 Psychological guerilla warfare***

One method to make an authority feel ashamed in public is to fire off a string of firecrackers to make a loud noise. It is the method often used to pillory the host during his party. It resembles firing firecrackers in Chinese-Thai celebrations to chase away ghosts and demons. So Aod threw firecrackers into the birthday party of the fourth boss in order to annoy him and shame him in front of his guests. Although she admitted that she risked being caught, she had no other way to release her frustration and to get revenge for being so maltreated and for having her career ruined. She had attempted to fight through the bureaucratic process but there was no progress.

### ***3.9 Body of knowledge: power and resistance***

Seeking and creating a body of knowledge is the final strategy that I as a researcher attempted in order to resist the heavy-handed use of power in a bureaucracy, though it is a strategy overlooked by most people. Such conflict is often considered as a small problem involving merely private, personal issues and thus not worth being taken seriously. It is claimed that the system already provides a channel for complaints. However, no one can tell how available channels can effectively serve people in trouble.

## **Discussion**

This use of power habituates bureaucratic to follow whatever commands are given them since they believe that such orders are given by a legitimate authority. They are brainwashed into believing that the boss is “commander” and that subordinates are mere functionaries. As a result, it is normal that a boss’s command will not be suspected or questioned. The superior can exercise power that interferes at all levels of work. This proves that the authority supposedly derived from official status but the boss can distract subordinates from doing their work, hinder them, and reduce their roles and responsibility. At the same time, he can manage to arrange activities to support, promote, and provide opportunity to those he likes. This agrees with Weber’s concept of the importance of work administration. As Weber emphasized “...the administrative structures have powerful sanctions with regard to the use of power,

allowing certain activities but inhibiting others, which has little to do with their social, political, or economic environments" (Krygier, 1979: 63). The work structure, by itself, significantly impacts officials' work. It plays an important role because the management can allow some activities to occur while prohibiting other activities. Therefore, the authority is empowered to make decisions based on his administrative prerogatives.

Dependency- Subordinates believed that the boss would love and support only his obedient and loyal followers and the rain down misery on those he considered recalcitrant and treacherous. Not surprisingly most subordinates tended to acquiesce and became the boss' satellites to be used as his tools. In the mind of subordinates, the prime authority in a bureaucracy is just like God, who can create heaven or hell for anyone he likes or dislikes. The language we use to refer to the boss, "*Jao Nai*" ("*jao*" meaning "*lord*" and *nai* meaning "*master*"), reflects how subordinates are supposed to see themselves in relationship to the boss. Thus, dependence on the boss is still strong in contemporary bureaucracies. So when a boss gets promoted to the top position, it signals which group of people will get power and opportunities and which group will be managed and excluded.

In regard to the relations between subordinates and their superiors, the former are discouraged from expressing their disagreement because this may be perceived as a lack of respect. This is based on Thai culture, in which juniors respect and obey their seniors. Even giving comments may be considered as undesirably aggressive. Generally, Thais think that to argue with the boss will lead to a bad relationship. This belief and attitude has been fostered from family and schools. Therefore, in a bureaucracy, it is difficult to find an opportunity to share opinions freely and straightforwardly. That is because the junior bureaucrats are afraid of possible repercussions. That is why when someone makes an accusation against the boss, he or she is viewed as an unusually brave person.

Rules and regulations thus becomes a secondary priority, overshadowed by the necessity to maintain good relationships and connections with the powerful. They have no fear of being caught up because no effective system can audit or inspect. As

the boss' comment, "How can they have an inspection? Everything has already been used up, so there is nothing left to be inspected."

By discrimination "we/they" discourse can produce a certain "truth," namely, that each bureaucrat will be treated differently. This truth creates a rationale for inequitable exercise of power in administration. The boss can determine which subject is right or wrong and who should get what and how. All is based on the principle "*dek nai*" or the boss's followers as shown in the narratives.

"*Normality*" comes from knowledge and truths created in daily bureaucratic work in order to make officials feel comfortable and confident in believing that the things they do are normal practice that everyone else engages in.

"*Truth*" create via committee is the tactics in the game of truth. The committees are used as tools to legitimize the abuse of power.

"*Discipline*" can be used as a tool for the target person who is under surveillance all the time is being treated like a prisoner.

"*Luu Lom*" is the tactic used by subordinate to compromise with the boss' needs. It is a way to survive in the system by not being strict with one's boss. To allow the benefits in routine practice become as normal business. A subordinate performing an inspection will get himself into trouble and will not be able to stay any longer. It is considered a reasonable requirement for survival in a bureaucracy.

The ideas of bureaucratic as legal-rational power of Weber is a site of social domination, nearly absolute power of an "iron-cage." And giving a limited potential for subordinate resistance to bureaucratic organizing. In addition the various forms of power (i.e., charismatic, traditional, rational-legal), can impose the will of the authority on the subordinate's subjectivity and consciousness as they perceived that the boss has the right to do so. The subordinate rarely challenge the authority's managerial prerogative as they perceive "*it natural to be that way.*" This makes those who challenge the bureaucratic structure or abuse of upper authority's order are often labeled as "*outsider*" unfit to be member of the community. The unchallenged subordinate is

then naturalization of the exercising of bureaucratic power. It gives rise to be a “trouble maker” label for subordinate who resist against the abused of power.

Through the thinking of Foucault (1989) we able to focus “how” does power work and how it circulate through a net-like organization. This study confirmed his believe that even the targets of abused of power are “simultaneously undergoing and exercising power.” Power and resistance are mutually constitutive; there is possibility of resistance in all relation of power.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Work life can affects the quality of our personal lives and overall life satisfaction. Persistent abused of power can cause the work environment to develops into a hostile and aggressive place. The narratives showed the daily life work experiences of four people as an example of how the abuses in power were demoralizing, humiliating, and devastating for them such as lost the job and reputation. The suggestions below regarding power and resistance in the bureaucracy are based on the view of the subordinates who faces the abuses in power on a daily basis.

#### **1. Demystify the power of the boss by questioning the inequities within organizational culture**

In Thai organization culture, bureaucrats are used to unequal power relationships. Thus, they do not normally question inequitable treatment of personnel or the dispensation of privileges to certain employees and not others. The notion that “the boss always comes first” and the “master/slave” mentality, which reflects the long-standing difference between the powerful top officials and subordinate bureaucrats, needs to be changed. If we force top level bureaucrats to question themselves, this will build a foundation of knowledge and truth. Furthermore, this question can serve as a counterbalance to the exercise of power.

**2. Decentralizing the power of the “master” in the bureaucracy**

The *nai/baw* (master/servant) system in the context of Thai bureaucracy is created by the traditional Thai patron-client relationship. It allows power to be wielded not on the basis of reason or efficiency but merely according to the whims of the “master.”

**3. Good governance in bureaucratic management**

The study found that management procedures responded primarily to the needs of the authority to maintain dominance over subordinates. Recalcitrant subordinates were gotten rid of if they did not play the game. Only manageable bureaucrats can stay in the system. This promotes nationwide corruption and nepotism in the bureaucracy. Good governance should be strongly employed in bureaucratic management to support transparency (can be audited anytime) in the exercise of power of the authority in accord with principles of morality and a code of ethics.

**4. Value of teamwork in the organization and civil society**

The way in which power is wielded by despotic top officials leads to the irresponsible use of power, ignoring both reason and normality. Centralized power creates its own discourse and notion of “truth”: i.e. “truth” according to the personal objectives of those in charge. Through staff unity, subordinates can successfully resist the carrying out illegal orders. Strong teamwork among subordinates can counterbalance and check the abuse of power. Legitimate and efficient use of power occurs when everyone shares a common organizational culture and objectives that serve the public. Openly discussing or criticizing how power is used will create a culture of transparency and accountability. Strong unity and cooperation is also needed to shield workers from possible repercussions that might otherwise result.

**5. Fostering social values of the sufficiency economy**

Corruption in a bureaucracy is a persistent problem. A major reason is that the lust for money that leads people to seek wealth both in good and bad ways. Making

great efforts to get a promotion or buying a position promotes greediness in competition to be the richest. This is the opposite of the ideal that bureaucrats should live within their means and provide for their families while remaining honest and conscientious when doing their jobs. Ideally, they should control themselves and not seek unwarranted compensation.

#### **6. Importance of culture in resisting power abuses in the organization**

Most often, resistance to power is viewed as a personal issue. Conflict in bureaucracy is overlooked as a minor problem not worth paying any attention to. It is useful, for example, by precipitating an investigation into wrongdoing. Therefore, the last suggestion is to set up a bureaucratic investigation mechanism that can determine punishment for misuse of power. The Administrative Court may be the answer of the abused regarding misuses of power. This research expected to promote among bureaucrats in general common sense and moral courage among subordinates bureaucrats in order to resist all misuse of power. The problems described in the narratives presented here do not belong only to the narrators but for every bureaucrat in Thai society as well.

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