

Quality of Contact between Community Members and Bangkok Metropolitan Police

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Abstract

This research was conducted in August 2012, using a survey questionnaire from a data sample of 15,000 civilians residing in Bangkok, Thailand. It aims to compare the level of quality of contact between community members and the police, which is considered an important factor that supports a constructive community policing concept. The results are based on community members' perception towards the police as they interact with the latter in five different roles of responsibility, particularly on: 1) Crime Prevention and Suppression 2) Traffic 3) Investigation 4) Interrogation, and 5) Administrative Affairs. As expected, the results using a one-way ANOVA found that the quality of contact between the public and Administrative Police was at the highest level. However, it was not significantly different to that of Investigation and Interrogation functions of the Police. Interestingly, the results show that the level of quality of contact between the public and Traffic Police and Crime Prevention and Suppression Police was significantly less than the other three. The discussion of the results is included in the study as well as the recommendations for the Thai Police.

Keywords: community policing, quality of contact, Thai police

Introduction

The quality of contact is one of the characteristics of intercommunication, arising from contact between groups. It can be used to describe the changing attitudes towards outsiders of the group (Chotchakornpant, 2009). It helps reducing anxiety that occurs between groups (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), creating positive attitudes among those outside the group (Anja, Tendayi, Dionne & Hewstone, 1993; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Voci & Hewstone, 2003) and reducing bias between groups (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Wright, Aron, McLaughli-Volpe & Ropp, 2006). In the context of this study, the term 'quality of contact' can be defined as "perception that occurred among the public at the time of contact with police". In the case that the perception is positive, it creates a learning situation about the outgroup, changing behaviors, affecting ties and emotions between one another and allowing ingroup reappraisal (Pettigrew, 1998). According to the Community Policing Consortium (2010), quality of contact is necessary for crime prevention, so both parties can jointly tackle crime and enhance the safety and quality of life of people in the community.

The community policing approach is a concept of crime prevention and control practices that builds upon the basis of police community partnership (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990) which focuses on creating a better understanding and cooperation between the public and the police (Chayapan, 2009: 22). If society shares the same beliefs and goals, they will act towards the benefits of their society (Sower, 1957), and look into the causes of public actions to solve problems in society (Fay, 1984). Creating positive perceptions and attitudes towards police among the public is a part of the policing duty and it must be done regularly (Nicholl, 2000). In order to create public movement to assist police with crime solving or other matters within the community is different from the traditional police approach, which leaves the problem solving for police and often uses law enforcement approach to terrorize criminals.

Traditional policing approach is a closed system where police do not seek cooperation from outsiders where the police and public do not have positive attitudes towards one another and the relationship is divisive (Harrington, 1981). There was another crime prevention approach called "a community relation approach," which aimed to generate interpersonal relationships and encourage community members to participate in crime prevention (Piamsomboon, 1988; 2002). Thailand had adopted the community relation approach in 1988. Each police station was required to set up community relations police division to seek support and work in collaboration with the community under the main goal of building positive relationships between the police and community (Chayapan, 2012). The approach had been implemented and continued, however, the crime rate did not reduce and the public still maintained a negative attitude towards police. Generally, the police believed the obligation to promote and collaborate with the community was not their responsibility; instead they believed it was only the duty of the community relations police division (Nicholl, 2000). Police, therefore, continued to enforce the laws and did not use the community relations approach. This resulted in a negative attitude towards the Royal Thai Police (RTP) as a whole, even though the RTP had a strategy on public participation and networking to be used as part of crime control. Part of this strategy relied on the paradigm shift of police officers working at all levels to focus on the participation of the community and using the community relations approach (Royal Thai Police, 2011: 15; Chayapan, 2012). One of the problems that prevented successful collaboration between the police and public in crime prevention was the community negative attitude towards the police. In particular, negative attitudes occurred when members of the community witness or experience discrimination, being exploited, threaten for money or simply being intimidated by police. (Assumption University, 2010)

According to the functions of responsibility divided within the Thai police station (Royal Thai Police, 2012), there are 5 functions of duty with regular contacts with the public (National Institute of Justice, 2004). Those groups are comprised of 1) Crime Prevention and Suppression police responsible for preventing crime and enforcing criminal laws as well as community relations 2) Traffic police responsible for all traffic related laws 3) Investigation police responsible for seeking evidence and witnesses to uphold justice for public in the case of criminal cases 4) Interrogation police responsible for collecting evidence and filing reports with comments to prosecutors and 5) Administration police who provide administrative support such as logistics, welfare, finance and procurement. Considering that Crime Prevention and Suppression police and Traffic police are directly responsible for law enforcement through activities such as patrolling, setting up check points to arrest offenders of the law. While Investigation police are responsible for seeking witnesses and evidence, and work closely with interrogation police in all criminal cases, the administrative police provide support to each division. As a result, the investigation, interrogation and administration police do not directly focus on crime prevention and control in the same ways as the other two. Piemsomboon (1988) argued that communication between the public and Crime Prevention and Suppression and Traffic police is one-way direction. Thus, they do not seek support from the public using the community policing approach (Nicholl, 2000) which led to the following hypothesis.

Research Hypothesis

H: The quality of contact between public and Crime Prevention and Suppression police and Traffic police is lower than other groups of police, namely investigation, interrogation and administration police.

The purpose of this study is to find out the differences in quality of contact between the public and police officers who work differently within police stations. The results of the study will be beneficial for the Royal Thai Police to improve the quality of contact between the public and police in order to create a better understanding and enhance collaboration to prevent and control crimes within the community.

Methodology

This study used a survey research method to study the level of quality of contact between the public and police officers in Bangkok where 5,710,883 people reside within 50 districts (Office of Registration, Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, 2012). Three hundred samples were collected from each district using a convenient sampling method, altogether a data sample of 15,000 people were surveyed. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire.

Researchers use questionnaire as a tool to collect data that was sorted into 2 groups 1) demographic data and 2) seven questions on the quality of contact with police, using the semantic differential scale, which is determined by 7 levels characterized by positive and negative opinions. The questionnaire was adapted from a study by Chotchakornpant (2009), which was developed from Chotchakornpant (2003), Islam and Hewstone (1993) and Pettigrew (1997), providing options for respondents to answer opposite to their opinions when they are in contact with police.

The testing for content validity, researchers contacted the experts to test out the construct validity and reliability. Researchers used the Factor Analysis testing and Cronbach's Alpha

Coefficient, which confirms the questionnaire has validity and reliability at an acceptable level. The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient shows more than 0.70 (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994; Peterson, 1994) and the factor loading of all 7 questions is no less than 0.40 (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor loading and the reliability of the tool.

Variable	Factor loading	Reliability (α)
Quality of contact (7 questions)	0.692 - 0.798	0.876

The statistics used in data analysis, includes descriptive statistics, consists of means and standard deviations, inferential statistics to test the hypotheses, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA), which is used to test whether the means between groups that are more than two are different. Following the ANOVA test, the post-hoc analysis is used to test whether there are any differences between means of each two-group.

Results

The data were divided into two steps as follows:

1) Analysis of demographic data. From 15,000 data sample sets of questionnaires, the majority of respondents were female at 55.3 percent. Age mean is 33.58 years old and 24.8 percent of the samples were students, followed by 20.6 and 19.9 percent of employee/work independently and traders/business owners respectively.

2) Hypothesis testing. 54.6 percent of the sample had contact with crime suppression police. The group that was found to have the highest quality of contact is the administrative police (mean = 4.379, SD = 1.285) as shown in Table 2. When conducting analysis of variance to test the differences in the mean between quality of contact of each group ($F = 14.587$), the results show a significant level of differences at .01, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: The mean and standard deviation of the quality of contact divided by their line of responsibility, within a police station.

Police Functions	Number of respondents (persons)	Mean ()	Standard deviation (SD)
Crime Suppression	8,192	4.072	1.268
Traffic	4,252	4.061	1.190
Investigation	1,561	4.224	1.166
Interrogation	618	4.292	1.212
Administration	377	4.379	1.285
Total	15,000		

Table 3: Results of the testing for the difference of the mean on the quality of contact divided by their line of responsibility, within a police station.

Sources of variation	Sum of Squares	df	Means Square	F
Between groups	89.910	4	22.228	14.587 *
Within groups	22849.363	14995	1.524	
Total	22938.274	14999		

* P-value < .01.

The researchers tested for the quality of contact each group of police to find out which groups are different, using posts - hoc tests. In this study, researchers use Scheffe's test to find out the differences between the groups that received high popularity and accepted null hypothesis and conservative figures (Hair et al., 2010: 473), which are suitable for an uneven number of samples in each group in accordance with the Games-Howell method. This method is similar to the Scheffe's test which is suitable for an uneven number of samples in each group and likely to accept a null hypothesis, in addition it is also suitable for samples with heterogeneous variances and does not take into account the nature of the data that have normality in distribution. (Hilton and Armstrong, 2006: 36; Abacus Concepts, 1993; Armstrong et al, 2000)

The test results from both methods show that the quality of contact between the public and crime suppression and traffic police are different from that of the investigation, interrogation and administration divisions at .01 level, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: The difference in quality of contact determined by the functions in a police station, using the post-hoc test.

Crime suppression	Traffic	Investigation	Interrogation	Administration
4.072	4.061	4.224	4.292	4.379

Note: Means connected by a straight line are not significantly different at the .01 level.

Discussion

The study result is in line with the hypothesis of the research that crime suppression and traffic police have different quality of contact with the public compared to police officers working in other responsibilities. Traffic police has the lowest quality of contact with the public (mean = 4.0617), followed by the crime suppression and investigation police (means = 4.0720, 4.2922 respectively). The administration police have the highest quality of contact with the public (mean = 4.3788).

These results give support to Piemsoomboon's (1988) claim that crime suppression police and traffic police are working to control crimes and focus primarily on law enforcement. They often appear in uniform, set up check points and arrest those who break the laws such as traffic laws, theft, etc. The crime suppression police, who are on patrol duty in the community, have highest frequency of contact with the public, as shown in the research (n = 8,192). The traditional policing approach focuses on law enforcement as the main tool to control crimes, thus, often times this police division must show and use force. Thus, crime prevention and suppression police and traffic police focus on enforcing the laws which have direct impacts on the public.

The traditional approach to control crimes is for police to inform the community, using a one way communication method (Piemsoomboon, 1988) resulting in a low quality of contact with the public. The traffic police hold responsibility in enforcing many legislative acts such as the Automobile Act, Land Traffic Act, and issue fines to those who are found breaking those laws. The strict use of the laws aiming to cause fear among public that create public's dissatisfaction with police performance (Pitak Santirat Radio Station, 2010). This is consistent with findings that the quality of contact of traffic police was the lowest (mean = 4.0617) that affects the image of the Royal Thai Police as a whole.

Pettigrew (1998) proposed that the quality of contact can improve the attitudes between one another as well as generate better cooperation between the public and law enforcement officers. If the Royal Thai Police wants to build trust and establish positive relationships for better cooperation in solving crimes and other problems according to community policing approach, it is important to enhance the quality of contact between the public and police. Police divisions need to engage in community relations and adapt it as part of their responsibilities (Chayapan, 2012). The crime suppression and traffic police have the highest frequency of contact with public and they are a key link between the police and the public. It is important that they have positive relationships with the community in order to work together towards a safe community for all.

Future Research Direction

This research uses a questionnaire to find out the quality of contact between the public and police using the 5 groups of function divided at the police station, but it did not consider other variables that may affect the quality of contact such as gender, education level, or hometown. To extend the research and find out more about the quality of contact, future research should include these variables. This research did not look into variables that influence the increase or decrease of the levels of quality of contact, therefore future research should conduct a literature review and expand the study to determine the relationship of the variables, and research which variables affect the quality of the contact. This will help determine the policy that is practical and beneficial for improving community relations between the public and police.

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