

# To believe or not to believe? Truths and lies in interviews with poor people

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*For research using qualitative interviews as the main method, it is not easy to convince respondents, particularly poor people, to participate and reveal what they are thinking and expecting. This research note reflects on the challenges encountered while undertaking ethnographic fieldwork with poor people working in tourism in Hanoi, Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 58 rickshaw drivers (30 formal and 28 informal workers). While many respondents were honest in their statement of formality or informality, some others were found to lie about their informality. This research is important in that it is arguably the first to address issues of truths and lies in (pro-poor) tourism studies, thereby sharing deeper insights into the difficulties associated with interviewing poor people whose voices are often not heard in the field.*

**Keywords:** *critical tourism studies, reflexivity, ethnography, fieldwork, poverty*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The interview is perhaps the most often used method in qualitative tourism research as well as the social sciences overall (Morse 2015). It is a form of interpersonal interaction between the interviewer and one or more people whereby knowledge is created through the exchange of views. It allows the researcher to gain deep knowledge of the lived experiences of research participants and make sense of complex human interactions and interrelations (Morse 2015). Indeed, Kvale (2008: 9) argues that the interview provides ‘a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences, and opinions’.

Yet, for research using qualitative interviews as the main method, it is not easy to convince respondents to participate. This difficulty is further intensified when it comes to interviewing poor and marginalised people in order to reveal what they are actually thinking and hoping for (Scheyvens/Storey 2003). This argument is made here from an ethnographic perspective. An ethnographic study was carried out with poor people working in tourism. Undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in poor settings, with which many of us are not familiar, provides important lessons often not mentioned in qualitative research method texts. In general, such texts offer guidance on how to sample, how to approach respondents, how to interview, how to analyse interviews, and how to report interview findings. Although these instructions are helpful, they rarely discuss in detail what to do if the researcher questions the authenticity of participants’ claims. As Morse (2017: 1383) argues, ‘the checks and balances of data quality, of certainty, of reflexivity during data gathering

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and analysis were scant, and the in-process descriptions of procedures were missing [from textbooks]’.

This research note is part of a qualitative study of poor people working in the informal tourism economy in Hanoi, Vietnam. The informal economy is defined as economic activities that take place beyond formal state regulation but that exclude illegal activities such as ‘black-market’ drugs (Truong 2018). The study examined rickshaw drivers’ perspectives and experiences regarding tourism and poverty in line with the qualitative interpretive approach advocated by pro-poor tourism researchers (Truong 2018). Specifically, it investigated rickshaw drivers’ reasons for working formally or informally, tourism’s contributions to their lives, and their views on the city council’s ban on informal workers.

The method used was semi-structured interviews, complemented by observations. Data were gathered at Sword Lake, West Lake, the Temple of Literature, and the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Systematic stratified sampling, a random probability sampling method popular among researchers in the social sciences, was employed to determine potential interviewee respondents (Bryman/Bell 2011). The first participants were approached randomly, the study’s purpose and the future use of the research findings were stated, and their consent was sought. Every 5th person encountered thereafter was invited to participate in the interviews. Participants were 18 years of age or older and had worked in their job formally (for rickshaw companies) or informally (independently) for at least one year prior to the interview. Many of them were not poor in economic terms (that is, living on less than US\$2 a day); instead, other factors were taken into consideration, such as low levels of education, limited employment opportunities, limited access to basic health services, and vulnerability. Chambers (1995: 175) defined vulnerability as ‘exposure and defencelessness. It has two sides: the external side of exposure to shocks, stress, and risk; and the internal side of defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss.’ Between April and September 2017, 58 rickshaw drivers (28 formal and 30 informal) were interviewed in Vietnamese. Each interview lasted 20 to 60 minutes, and the constant comparative method (Glaser/Strauss 1967) was employed to analyse the transcripts. The main findings were published in Truong et al. (2020).

## 2 INITIAL INTERVIEWS (AND OBSERVATIONS)

Before coming back to Vietnam to undertake fieldwork, I had worked in Western and other Asian countries for several years. Because I was a Vietnamese citizen, spoke Vietnamese, and had some knowledge of rickshaw driving I was deemed an insider (Sultana 2007). However, I viewed myself as an outsider to my study settings, spending the first few weeks wandering about the field sites, chatting with local people, and observing rickshaw drivers. My aim was to get a sense of what happened on-site and consider the best ways to access my respondents. Put another way, I adopted an etic perspective to observe and study rickshaw drivers’ behaviour from outside of the study context (Pike 1967).

Many rickshaw drivers appeared to be sceptical of my presence. Often they perceived me as a tourist from somewhere in Asia, due to my overt Asian appearance. Some of them asked me to take a ride around Sword Lake. When I talked with them in Vietnamese, they tended to perceive me as a journalist or policeman in disguise to inspect their informal livelihood. Vigilant of potential risks, they were reluctant to share their life stories with me. Therefore, I adopted an alternative strategy.

When I conversed with my participants, I told them about my research: that I sought to capture various opinions regarding tourism and poverty, and that I was ready to hear everyone's voice. I tried to persuade them that I was an ethical scholar who would not reveal their identities or report their business to the police. I also told them about my family background: that I was born and raised in a rural area that was often the same as where they came from; that I experienced a difficult life in my youth, but that I had managed to pursue further studies in the West. Moreover, I talked about contemporary situations in rural areas, immigration, and concerns about children, which proved my awareness of the issues facing them and provided me with some credibility.

It seemed my life story touched my participants, given the similar hardships I had lived through like them and given that most of them had migrated to Hanoi to afford a better education for their children. As a result, many participants, although sceptical at first, became more open to conversing with me. I realised my life story had spread among rickshaw drivers and, due to this, my presence was more welcome. I could stand beside them in the street talking about many topics unrelated to my interview protocol. I also helped them communicate with foreign tourists wishing to take rides. In some sense, I was an observer-as-participant because I was able to 'participate' in the day-to-day working lives of my participants.

### 3 A TURNING POINT DURING INTERVIEWS

Given that my presence as a researcher was somewhat accepted by my participants, I was optimistic about my research progress and findings. The turning point came after I had interviewed Triền and Đức (pseudonyms), who were brothers-in-law and worked closely together. They invited me to come to their rented house and dine with them one evening. There they explained why they chose to work formally or informally; the benefits and costs of each livelihood strategy; the unfair profit-sharing policy maintained by local rickshaw companies; the misconduct of some informal rickshaw drivers; and their tactics used to cope with local traffic police. They went on to tell me that what I saw or heard on the street might not always be correct. They said that many rickshaw drivers were actually informal but, when talking to me, stated that they were formal for fear of me reporting them in the local media. (It was at this very moment that I realised that most of those I had interviewed claimed they worked for a local rickshaw company, meaning that they were formal drivers!) Furthermore, Triền and Đức showed me how to distinguish a formal driver from his informal colleague: a formal driver had to wear his company uniform; he had a valid vehicle registration; and he often had to wait his turn at his company's designated parking area.

What Triền and Đức had told me was extremely valuable and changed my interview process significantly. From that day I saw rickshaw drivers with new eyes. When I began to talk with them, I tried to reassure them that my research would not do them any harm. I secretly looked for evidence of formality and informality, and changed my interview questions accordingly. For instance, I asked a driver directly why he had chosen to become an informal driver, instead of asking whether he was formal or informal like before. This meant that I shifted towards embracing an emic perspective and looked at my interviewees through the eyes of members of the local rickshaw driver community (Pike 1967). This technique worked in most cases: many drivers no longer attempted to lie about their informality, assuming that their status was already known to me. Meanwhile, several others initially said they worked

for one local rickshaw company. However, as our interview continued I realised they had been formal drivers but had left their companies to be independent and free. In other words, they were informal workers – the evidence being that their vehicle registration had expired, that they cycled around looking for tourists, and that they did not wear company uniforms. During the interview process I kept in touch with *Triển* and *Đức* and re-visited them as their time allowed to cross-check what I was told by other drivers.

To some extent these drivers' lies about their work was understandable, given their fear of potential risks caused by their informality. Their lies suggested I was 'othered' by them, which was not about them liking or disliking me but was based more on the presumption that I might pose a threat to their safety. In addition, their lies may also have been because my research was not important to them or they did not think it would help. Indeed, many of them were suspicious of any change my research might make to the status quo. They said they had participated in many studies of this sort before, but that 'they [researchers] show up and go and we remain the same, at the bottom of society' (*Chường*, informal rickshaw driver). I experienced helplessness because the 'they' in this response, I felt, included me. It suggested that some interviewees saw themselves as mere sources of data that helped advance the researcher's career, while their 'problem' was forgotten.

### 3 LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The utility of interviews has been widely recognised in the social sciences. In the tourism field it has been argued to be capable of offering new dimensions to the body of tourism knowledge, alongside other qualitative methods (Frost/Frost 2021). My interviews with poor rickshaw drivers working in tourism in Hanoi allowed the discovery of phenomena that I did not expect or anticipate before going into the field, despite my prior knowledge of rickshaw driving. This discovery, which was attributed to the help of *Triển* and *Đức*, changed me and my fieldwork journey. I realised that, as qualitative researchers, we should listen to and learn from our participants. We should not only motivate them to speak from their own experiences as well as from others'; we should also encourage them, where willing, to verify information, including information we obtain from other interviewees. This notion, coined 'learning from participants' (Morse 2017: 1374), is crucial to the collection of valid data and thus the production of reliable tourism knowledge. It is especially important in the case of interviewing poor people working in the informal sector, where rapport tends to be difficult to build; and it is equally challenging to reveal their thoughts and hopes. Sharing our own lived experiences with participants and learning from them helps bridge the divides between us researchers and those participating in our research, enabling us to build and nurture trust with them. As they may no longer perceive us as potential threats, they may be more open to converse with us and share honest and deep insights about their circumstances, based on which potential measures can be designed to help lift them out of poverty or reduce their vulnerability.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that strategies to improve the credibility of qualitative research findings included sustained engagement, tenacious observation, and triangulation. The use of a variety of (material) sources, investigators, methods, and theories seems to be the most popular when researchers speak of triangulation. Yet, I argue that using multiple and different participants to verify interview data, including those gathered from other respondents, represents another possible triangulation

technique. The use of member-checking is also helpful in addressing the divides as well as tensions that may arise between the insider/emic and outsider/etic perspectives (Olive 2014). This research note is dedicated to Triền and Đức, among other rickshaw drivers, who ‘opened my eyes’ and showed me how to verify truths and lies in the field, beyond what I had learnt from textbooks.

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