Qualitative Research Training in a Bhutanese Context: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT: After discussing the scope and rationale of the paper, I provide a chronological sketch of the opening portions of the ERASMUS-funded HAPPY training conducted during December 2021, which featured international and local experts guiding and facilitating the proceedings. This description helps to identify themes, and provides a clearer sense of how qualitative research methods were taught and learned. Next, drawing upon interviews, the paper considers the opportunities and challenges of qualitative research at HEIs in Bhutan. Interviews and other data suggest that participants found this training to be a challenging process, and felt a notable sense of accomplishment upon completing ToT3 in March 2022 (ToT3 being the phase which involved trainees doing research projects). Looking to areas that might be addressed in the future, I discuss my observation that usage convenience sampling by trainees during the ToT3 research was higher than I might have expected. Rather than automatically assuming this to be a 'weakness', however, I do my best to explore this topic from different angles. I also briefly touch upon the question of self-censorship in Bhutanese research. While I would describe my paper as 'suggestive' rather than 'conclusive', I hope that the ideas suggested here can be taken up further by future researchers and/or stimulate further debate.

Keywords: social sciences, qualitative methods, group research, sampling methods, interviewing, participant observation.

Introduction

An ERASMUS[2]-funded training in qualitative research methods, part of a project known as HAPPY,[3] was held for selected faculty from four colleges within the Royal University of Bhutan system in late 2021 and early 2022, and was a unique event RUB's history.

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[2] ERASMUS: European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students.

[3] HAPPY: **H**igher Education Teaching **APP**roaches for Sustainabilit**Y** and Well-Being in Bhutan. Project Number 618793-EPP-1-2020-1-NL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

Historically speaking, quantitative methods have had been much more strongly established in Bhutan, and various commentators have noted, and sometimes even lamented upon, this state of affairs. Ten years ago, Dr. Dorji Penjore stated the following:

> If the Bhutanese education planners had exercised their foresights, anthropology, not sociology, should have been a more useful course to study Bhutan, a nation of villages and farmers. (2012: 1)

While the matter is complex, anthropology is often associated more strongly with qualitative methods (a point we shall return to below) and sociology more strongly with quantitative methods. Whatever the case, the quote above can be interpreted at least in part as a plea for placing greater emphasis on qualitative methods. Implicit in the comment about Bhutan's villages and farmers is that statistics cannot easily capture Bhutan's diversity and variation. Paying attention to people's sentiments, getting to know them, and even participating in their lives to better understand them are hallmarks of qualitative methods. Questionnaires and other quantitative methods, for all their importance, may be impersonal, and more importantly may fail to capture nuances and contested meanings among people who make up the fabric of a society.

Before turning to my own research, it could be useful to shed further light on how qualitative methods can be immensely helpful. I should state at the outset that the makeup of participants at the HAPPY training was highly diverse. By my count, there were approximately nine different academic disciplines represented, ranging from Business to English Studies to History. There are compelling reasons for increased use of qualitative methods across all of these disciplines, and these arguments will sometimes be discipline-specific. Nevertheless, particularly as anthropology is often regarded as the discipline of qualitative methods *par excellence*,[4] I will provide two examples from anthropologists which I hope will be compelling to readers with other backgrounds as well.

The first comes from an introductory anthropology textbook authored by a Norwegian anthropologist. The distinction he is making in this particular case is between verbal data and observational data. Observational data, which played a key role in the HAPPY training, is qualitative by definition, though in actuality, verbal data can be either qualitative or quantitative. Nevertheless the example he provides is vivid and will help to drive the point home:

> The significance of observational data can hardly be exaggerated. Far too many

[4] A primary reason for this is simply that a major qualitative technique, participant-observation, originated within anthropology before being adapted by other disciplines, and continues to be central to it. The relationship between interviewing techniques and anthropology, on the other hand, is clearly more complex. The extent to which anthropological interviewing methods specifically influenced other disciplines would be extremely hard to trace, and I am not aware of any such studies. Probably a more fruitful line of enquiry would be to look at how different approaches to interviewing from different disciplines have mutually influenced each other and/or have developed in parallel.

> social scientists seem to believe that verbal communication, either via interviews or questionnaires, offers a shortcut to an understanding of people's life-worlds. But it is not always possible to place one's views on a scale ranging from, say, 'I fully agree' to 'I fully disagree'. For my own part, I have the most advanced social scientific education available, yet whenever I am rung up by a pollster asking where I last saw a particular advertisement or how I evaluate the future of the monarchy on a scale of 1 to 5, I rarely know what to say. (Eriksen, 2004, p. 89)

An additional example comes from the fieldwork of an American anthropologist, Douglas Raybeck, doing research in Malaysia, and illustrates how living among a community will offer very different perspectives than can be yielded by any statistical accounts. According to Islamic norms, it is generally a man who should initiate a divorce, and statistics about divorces reflect this. However, Raybeck observed a case where a woman who was unhappy with her marriage, and whose husband would not grant a divorce, loudly creating a scene outside their home, in which she berated her husband for various forms of behaviour. This breaking of taboos was found awkward by the neighbours, and they soon visited the husband, stating that his behaviour was bringing shame to the neighbourhood. He relented, and filed for divorce at a courthouse. No reasonable observer would conclude that he 'initiated' the divorce, yet of course according to the official statistics registered, that is precisely what he did. Raybeck summarized as follows:

> It is fieldwork of the sort described here that leads anthropologists to be wary of official statistics. Had I trusted official accounts, I would be reporting that nearly all divorces were initiated by males. I am strongly committed to the importance of quantitative data, and have recorded figures on divorce, marriage, and adoption for the [area where I did research]. However, context is necessary to determine how data should be interpreted and evaluated, and anthropologists believe that an appreciation of context is best developed through fieldwork. (Raybeck, 1996, p. 258)

This quote merits some context of its own: this is from a memoir about research that was done in the 1960's, and fieldwork and participant-observation have long ceased to be the exclusive preserve of anthropologists. As such, many non-anthropologists today would share the sentiments above. Whatever the case, the example provided here should help to provide a more vivid sense of the pitfalls of relying on statistics about people's beliefs, opinions, and behaviours. Qualitative research, on the other hand, provides numerous ways of enriching our understanding.

Scope and Structure of this Paper

As a way of conveying some sense of what the HAPPY training was like, this paper sets the scene by providing a narrative of the first day and a half of ToT1 (the first session of 'Training of Teachers'). This name points to the ultimate goal of more RUB faculty being able

to teach research methods and guide student qualitative projects. There had been three rounds of ToT at the time of writing this paper, with the third round culminating in groups of four to five faculty presenting their research projects which they worked on together.

Leaving aside the homework that was required, the total amount of training was basically equivalent to 10 days or a bit more. I attended about half of the sessions to observe and sometimes participate, which included joining different groups in their discussions as well as leading one session on interviewing methods. Since an account of what transpired during all this time would not be reasonable, describing the first day and a half seemed like an effective way for outsiders to gain a sense of what this training involved (and hopefully, even refresh the memory of participants). As it happens, only ToT1 was conducted in person, and the later phases had to be conducted virtually, due to semester recess and/or lockdowns. At any rate, the important point to this introductory narrative is that I have tried my best to portray the training as a dynamic process, highlighting Bhutanese participants' comments and reactions.

After this narrative, I use interviews to explore ways in which participants gained research skills and a sense of accomplishment and research skills, and conclude by looking at a few areas that might be addressed in the future.

Setting the Scene

On the morning of 13 December 2021, faculty members and staff from the above-mentioned four colleges in the RUB system convened to begin their five day session devoted to learning the theory and practice of qualitative research methods. The participants came from the College of Language and Culture Studies, Norbuling Rigter College, Royal Thimphu College, and Sherubtse College.

After an initial round of self-introductions and their accompanying humour, preliminary discussions were led by RTC's Kencho Pelzom, who was the main organizer of these events. Much of the remainder of the morning session was spent on practical matters: how soon will we begin the formidable task of curricular revision? What do participants expect from this training? And, given the vast differences in our fields of study, research experiences, and number of years in academia, what kind of commonality might there be in what we understand qualitative methods to be? Challenging though these matters may be, addressing them gave us a sound footing before beginning our Zoom meetings with experts in the Netherlands.

Our afternoon session was primarily conducted by Dr. Lorraine Nencel, who joined us virtually from the Netherlands. After the inevitable 'can you hear me?' queries which have become a firm part of our pandemic-era Zoom culture, there were additional formalities and personal introductions from the Dutch team. Dr. Nencel soon turned to concepts that may strike fear into the heart of not only amateur researchers, but even advanced ones too. However, her introductions to the concepts of ontology and epistemology did not begin with technical definitions, but rather used questioning as one important device to reflect upon these topics, for instance "How do you *describe* reality?" (ontology) versus "How do we *learn about* reality?"

(epistemology; italics added for both quotes). Paintings and photographs, from Japan, Russia, and elsewhere were also carefully chosen to reflect different aspects of debates and to stimulate discussion. Participants soon had to stake out their own ground: what is your epistemological and ontological position? We also got interesting glimpses of how Bhutanese perspectives fit in with these international concepts. For instance one participant suggested that he believes Buddhist teachings are realist but that, when it comes to his academic work, he needs to take an idealist stance.

Matters next took on an increasingly practical turn, as Dr. Nencel furnished concrete examples from her fieldwork in Peru and other countries to further elucidate qualitative research and other points. Participants from the RUB colleges sometimes asked questions that would help them frame these perspectives in relation to their prior training which, as implied in the introduction to this paper, was significantly more likely to be quantitative. Some participants took up with enthusiasm this task of transitioning from the relatively known to the relatively unknown, and so one question began with discussing the replicability crisis in some (quantitative) social sciences, and the attempts of researchers to reach firm conclusions from ambiguous materials through methods such as p-hacking. Are there similar problems in qualitative research? As was often the case, Dr. Nencel suggested that the aims, frameworks, and standards of proof of qualitative research mean that there cannot, or should not be, a parallel problem in qualitative work. (Qualitative research has actually faced its own separate crises, though they did not come up in this particular answer, perhaps to better start the training with a more optimistic tone.)

The sessions on the morning of December 14 were conducted by Mr. Roderick Wijunamai, who had been teaching sociology at RTC for over three years. Perhaps anticipating unspoken doubts among the participants, he went straight to an important point: why *do* we need to consider philosophical stances before undertaking research? This fed into a larger point that philosophy is really intrinsic to thinking about things anyway: for instance, just deciding to oneself that 'philosophy complicates matters unnecessarily' is, itself, an act of philosophizing.

After reviewing the previous day's sessions, Roderick gave frequent anecdotes and practical examples to further enforce difficult concepts from the previous day such as ontology. When it came to theoretical background, he often drew upon sociology's founding fathers' ways of thinking and explanations, but also looked 'behind the scenes' at how Max Weber, in particular, arrived at his social interpretation through the study of texts and his family background in reading and interpreting the Bible. A sentence, for instance, cannot be forced into what we want it to mean, but has to be understood in the much broader context of the passages that come before and after it, plus numerous other factors if they are available (authorship, etc.). Some participants found it helpful to point out that Buddhist texts of the *sutra* genre also place a large value on context – they do not just launch straight into the Buddha's teaching, but provide information about the location, the type of participants, and the number of participants.

A central exercise during the morning session was to give participants a preliminary

taste of observation, which was to be taken up as the main theme in the next morning's session. There was a series of short video clips shot in various spots around London and participants, who had been placed in eight groups,[5] were tasked with discussing them once all films had been viewed. The number of questions posed but not answered by these clips was formidable: how close or far apart are these spots to each other? Since there is a series of daytime shots and a series of night time shots, are these in true chronological order? Did the people filming have a bad microphone, or did they deliberately emphasize bass frequencies as a way of making some kind of point about urban life? The ToT participants were, at any rate, thrown into the proverbial deep end and left to themselves as to what they wanted to look for, with the expectation being that they should find some kind of pattern or reach some sort of conclusion, rather than providing a long unconnected list of things they had seen.

Hearing all eight groups present some form of consensus among its own constituent members was quite revealing. Some points were common to more than one group ('males are more likely to be out walking at night'), and in some cases groups had opposing interpretations ('people are walking at a relaxed pace' versus 'people are in a hurry'). In perhaps half of the cases, the idea that the film represented 'Western culture' was presented as a way to make sense of the findings.

As the only 'Westerner' in the room at the time (albeit one who had lived in Asia for over 15 years), I followed these interpretations with great interest. I found for instance that some group's decision to use the concept of 'individualism' as having explanatory force seemed a bit misplaced relative to my own observations and experiences (I believe, for instance, that a waitress stacking up chairs alone as a restaurant is closing can better explained by socioeconomic matters). However, ultimately this simply illustrated an important broad point of this kind of training: everyone's perceptions will be shaped by their prior beliefs, and often there is no way to prove or to disprove an interpretation. Whatever the case, I found the attempts to make such connections stimulating and interesting, and the exercise forced people to use their best efforts to make sense of messy data where it was impossible to take in everything at once.

Before proceeding on to the next section, it is important to mention two additional lectures in the whole sequence of ToT events. Both of them took place online. One of these occurred between ToT2 and ToT3, while the other occurred towards the beginning of ToT3. The first of these was by Dr. Karma Phuntsho, who shared his views on the strengths and weaknesses of research culture in Bhutan at present, these views having been shaped by his unique combination of Bhutanese monastic training and doctoral education at Cambridge University. The second was by Dr. Françoise Pommaret, originally of French but now of Bhutanese nationality, whose experience conducting and supervising research in Bhutan goes back several decades. I strongly suspect that for many participants in the HAPPY training, these two lectures were among the highlights. Regrettably, in the interest of space, I cannot do justice

[5] These are the same eight groups who later worked together on one research project per group, and presented these at the end of ToT3.

to their lectures or the dialogs that followed at the end of them. However, in my search for themes to help analyse what I encountered during the course of the research HAPPY training, it seemed clear that their years of experience would provide us with fruitful areas for inquiry. Among the many points they addressed, I found Dr. Karma Phuntsho's discussion of self-censorship among Bhutanese scholars, and Dr. Pommaret's discussion of Bhutanese tendencies to do research among their own communities, to be extremely helpful in formulating this paper.

Benefits of the Training

Having provided a sense of what the training was like, it remains to ask: how did participants feel after they had completed all the training and collaborated with their peers to conduct and present their research project? Prior to answering this question, some methodological points are in order.

I conducted interviews with a total of six participating faculty members. The process began with I four leaders of the eight groups. The groups I chose to focus on were ones that seemed like they would be more fruitful for the themes I sought to explore. For instance, projects that touched upon matters of national identity seemed more likely to help me explore matters of how QRM was being adapted in a specifically Bhutanese context (as it happens, I did not end up doing much with this theme, though I hope others will take it up in the future).

Diversifying so as to interview leaders of the maximum number of teams possible would not necessarily have been the best approach. Instead, internal diversity seemed potentially more useful: richer data can be acquired by interviewing different members of a group rather than construing the group leader's account as somehow 'definitive' of the experience. On this point, I admittedly fell short of my goals by interviewing just two additional members of these four groups. The lockdowns that continued for a few weeks after ToT3 training posed problems: for a while, online interviews were the only way to move forward, but many of these yielded content where the audio quality was too poor to make full use of it. By the time I could potentially meet with colleagues again, a new set of problems emerged: since community transmission of Covid was, for the first time, being accepted as a part of daily life, lecturers now meeting with classrooms full of students had a very different set of concerns to grapple with. Despite these shortcomings, I hope that the themes I explored here will be useful to future researchers as possible areas to look further into.

In the interviews below, I do not distinguish between group leaders and others in the group, since all of these quotes provide perspectives on direct experience of conducting research, rather than the role of being either a 'leader' or 'follower'.

The best place to start when examining participants' experiences is the sense of accomplishment and increased understanding they often reported upon. One interviewee, with a background in quantitative methods but not much prior exposure to qualitative methods, reported the following at the beginning of an interview:

> When I think about the research and training, the thing that really stands out is

> the process, the whole process… I really didn't expect that I would be able to do this research… At the very beginning, I kept on telling [two of the Bhutanese facilitators] "I'm not able to understand anything. I'm not getting anything." But, as and when we were doing the field research, I actually found the whole process very interesting as well, where we don't know anything, but we keep learning as and when we do research.

These thoughts were extended and amplified at the interview's end:

> At the beginning, it was very challenging because we were all coming from different colleges. And not only that, but personally for me, I found the language that the experts were using was also very challenging for me. And even when the experts were asking questions, I was not able to understand even the question, when she was asking 'From which position are you looking from', it was very difficult for me as well. But when we were doing the fieldwork, I was actually able to realize what was being taught, and it was very interesting.

As it happens, the position or stance discussed in the penultimate sentence above refers back to something on the first day of the training, a point which was also captured briefly in the narrative that began this paper. The very terms 'epistemology' and 'ontology', can sound quite daunting, and grasping their nuances can take time. Yet, as discussed in my above, one of the facilitators in the Netherlands encouraged participants to take stances on these matters fairly soon. While the quote above suggests that the ability to understand them well in a classroom setting may initially be difficult, it also seems clear that going out and doing research can help one to look back at the concepts in new ways on the basis of experience gained.

While the above interviewee's background was in quantitative methods, another interviewee, whose background is in literature and not social sciences, gained a sense of satisfaction in experiencing that it was possible to transfer or adapt her skills from one domain to another:

> I think in literature we're always looking at, not just the literal meaning, but what is the hidden meaning, what are the symbols, what's the metaphor. So, I think when you analyse an interview or an observation and you're looking at that, I think… you're able to make interpretations, not just from what is said, but also looking at the body language of people who are talking, or how they answered, or their tone, or even a nervous laugh. I think that can also help you in interpreting… Of course, it's not just like analysing a literary piece, you want facts… but I think it does help, and definitely when you are reading an interview [transcript], it does help, when you're talking about fracturing and coding. As you're reading, you can kind of say 'This is where [a theme] stands out'.

There are clearly many ways in which the training was a success. A comparison of before and after scores on a quiz testing knowledge of qualitative methods shows a substantial amount of

learning between the very beginning and end of the training. Furthermore, the eight participating groups' final presentations were evidence of much growth, and all of the observers I spoke with in the aftermath of these presentations was notably impressed by how much had been accomplished. But of course, in a paper like this, one should also seek out areas for growth or problems to be solved as well, which will be addressed next.

Research Challenges in a Bhutanese Context

When I reflected back on what I had heard while listening in on (and sometimes participating in) various 'check in' sessions between all eight groups and the experts appointed to guide them, as well as my interviews with members of four of these groups, it seemed like the extent to which participants were using convenience sampling was higher than I might expect (for instance, five out of six of my interviewees had used this method in their project). Simply put, convenience sampling, at least in the cases I observed, meant interviewing and observing people one already knows,[6] rather than reaching out to identify strangers who might better fit particular criteria, and arguably helping to create a certain degree of distance that many researchers have observed can help facilitate research. This question of 'distance' is actually a highly complex matter which I cannot do full justice to here, but I will let the sentiments in the quotes below speak for themselves.

A few qualifying remarks seem important. First of all, speaking with people that one feels more comfortable with should not automatically be assumed to be a 'weakness' in research. As Françoise Pommaret pointed out in her guest lecture, Bhutanese researchers have often found that they get better results when working with communities that are close to them, or which they at least already know fairly well. Secondly, lockdowns began a bit more than halfway into the period when HAPPY trainees were supposed to be doing their research. We need to take this into account, because it is possible that this pushed some participants more strongly in the direction of convenience sampling would have been the case otherwise (Dr. Dolma Choden Roder, personal communication). Nevertheless, having spoken with various group members before these lockdowns took place, it seemed to me like there was already a fairly strong tendency towards convenience sampling.

Whatever the case may be, I found it noteworthy that a majority of our interviewees pointed out matters relating to the decision to research among friends or relatives during the course of the interview, in some cases without any prompting. Here is one example:

> Q: Was there anything challenging or difficult about doing participant-observation, and if so, what was it?

[6] The following is a fairly typical characterization of convenience sampling: "Essentially, individuals who are the most ready, willing, and able to participate in the study are the ones who are selected to participate" (Samure and Given, 2008). As will be seen, the type I discuss in this paper is a bit more specific, most frequently involving friends and/or family.

> A: As I said, in my case since I knew the people, it wasn't difficult at all. It was very easy to make an arrangement, make an appointment and go and meet them. But, had it been in the case of meeting strangers, with getting an appointment, perhaps it would have been a little difficult. I can sense that, because not everybody would give you time these days.

This answer raises a few questions: for instance, is this a common problem of people in a busy urban environment? (As it happens, this particular faculty member did indeed do his research in a city.) Or, does it perhaps reflect a general lack of familiarity with, or even some distrust of, research among the general public? I will return to such questions later, but for now I will note that, without being prompted, this interviewee soon after expressed some concern about his usage of convenience sampling:

> In a way I regret that I went to the people whom I knew. I should actually also have met one or two who were complete strangers to me, so that I could have the feeling of a real interview, in the real world.

Another interviewee, who happens to have been a member of the same research group, but was interviewed completely separately from the previous interviewee, also viewed her research among people she knew as posing problems, for a somewhat more explicit set of reasons:

> So, when we went there [to the homes of friends and family] and did our participant observation, I think it became difficult for us to differentiate ourselves as researchers and participant-observers because we had previously interacted with each other so often. In that sense, it was difficult for us to differentiate ourselves from friends and family.

While the above quote clearly stresses ways in which the *researcher* may have difficulty adapting, the following quote, from yet another interviewee, focuses on how the *people being researched* may also find their new role to be unfamiliar:

> For me, when I was interviewing my friends, I found that they were not taking it that seriously, because the topic was related to beauty, and it was a little bit challenging for me to really get the truth out of them. For example, when I was asking 'How do you define beauty?' they would say things like 'Beauty is not that important' or 'Beauty is about being confident', but I know that they do spend lots of money [on beauty products]... But if we just look at the transcript, it's like the whole truth was not being revealed.

But of course, the points by the interviewees in the two quotes above are, ultimately, closely connected: a switch away from accustomed roles can pose challenges for researcher and research participant alike.

I cannot draw any firm conclusions, but dialog about ways that qualitative researchers could most effectively consider doing more to step out of their 'comfort zones' could be a useful

next step. Doing so is likely to feel difficult in the short run, but in the long run, researchers might find unexpected benefits. That said, I am keenly aware of pragmatics: valiantly going out to explore a completely different community, or totally cutting oneself from one's community to immerse oneself in a different one *could* offer considerable rewards, but could just as well leave a sense of regret if one came away with the conclusion that an 'insider' (however construed) would have found that research participants were notably more willing to share their views and experiences.

Another area for consideration is for researchers to brainstorm further about ways they can convey the nature of research and the research process to prospective participants who may have little sense about what it actually involves. It is a common statement, to the extent of being a trope, that Bhutan has had to rapidly adapt to changes, in just a few decades, which other countries have had centuries to adapt to. Still, there is much to consider on this point. Consider a pair of examples like the following, with the first being written by two European scholars:

> Interviews have… become part of the common culture. In the current age, as visualized by the talk shows on TV, we live in an "interview society", where the production of the self has come in focus and the interview serves as a social technique for the public construction of the self. (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, p. 12)

Compare this with Dorji Penjore's account of interviewing people in his home village, in Zhemgang, in 2006:

> Most respondents expressed discomfort at being recorded. Their conversation, tone and excitement changed on seeing an MP3 recorder. Some even refused to be recorded. (2009, p. 6)

Of course, the European example is intended by the authors as a cultural generalization – surely there are plenty of situations in Western countries where people decline to be interviewed, or generally become uncomfortable when they are being recorded. Likewise, it seems probable that Zhemgang villagers' general level of comfort with interviews would be higher in the 2022 than what Dorji Penjore experienced in 2006. Nevertheless, the European authors of the work quoted above trace Western 'interview culture' back to the middle of the 19th century (2009: 8). Suffice it to say that Bhutan has had a shorter period of time than this, and so it is entirely natural to suppose that getting people to feel more comfortable about interviews, or being observed in the course of research, would take some extra work.

A final point I would like to touch on in this paper concerns self-censorship. As noted above, Dr. Karma Phuntsho suggested that this is a major component of research in Bhutan today. His views on redressing this are pragmatic, and he summed up his views eloquently during his guest lecture:

> We can't have a revolution overnight, but if paragraph by paragraph you become more open, year after year, you are making a difference.

As noted previously, I wanted to pick up on this theme of self-censorship and see whether it would help me to better understand whether it was effecting the dynamics of HAPPY research projects. This can be a hard matter to address in interviews (and, indeed, I never even used the term self-censorship when asking questions), because when people censor their thoughts in their own mind, or in their own notebooks or final writings, how are they going to feel eager about discussing this with someone else? Whatever the case, I only encountered one clear example, which goes back to the time when groups were formulating their research topic. One of these groups was quite interested in a highly visible quasi-occupational group in Bhutan, about whom people have a wide range of opinions. While this research group initially wanted to pursue public perceptions of these workers, they were concerned about some of the sensitivities that might come up. As such, they ultimately chose to explore this quasi-occupational group's own experiences and how they perceived themselves, instead of looking at how they were perceived by others.

Final Remarks

Observing the HAPPY training from start to finish was thought provoking. I would like to thank everyone who shared their thoughts, and helped to make this such an enjoyable experience.[7] As noted above, factors arising from the pandemic curtailed my research plans. Furthermore, I faced a problem common to many researchers: because I did not manage to fully identify my chosen themes until late in the process, I was not able to then 'test' those themes by having a second round of interviews to hone in on these points, especially since by that point detailed memories of the training were becoming less vivid for most participants. Despite these shortcomings, I hope that my observations can help to stimulate more dialog and research about the future of qualitative methods in Bhutan.

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[7] I would also especially like to thank Mr. Chencho Dorji of Royal Thimphu College for having several discussions with me about the training and sharing his experiences.