

Structural Gravity of Lived Experience: Introducing "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA) as a Methodological Innovation for Researching Marginalized Transitions

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Abstract

This paper addresses the institutional precarity and policy cliffs experienced by marginalized populations, specifically Thailand's "ART Generation" during welfare transitions driven by "deinstitutionalization" within a rigid bureaucratic polity. To overcome traditional Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis's (IPA) tendency to obscure macro-structural oppression, this study constructs "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA), a triadic hermeneutic framework linking micro-level embodied suffering to macro-level institutional critique. Methodologically, the analytical utility of this model is validated through a high-fidelity "Heuristic Hypothetical Vignette" built from existing welfare statutes, medical literature, and local anthropological research. The step-by-step coding simulation demonstrates SW-IPA's capacity to penetrate cultural stigma, decode institutional indifference, and reveal automated algorithmic exclusions within commodified labour markets shaped by digital biopolitics. This study offers a rigorous, structurally reflexive methodological protocol for critical qualitative research among vulnerable populations under transition, providing crucial insights for optimizing transitional welfare policies.

Keywords: Structural Gravity; Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis (SW-IPA);
Deinstitutionalization; ART Generation; Digital Biopolitics

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of social welfare in the Global South, Thailand is undergoing a significant paradigm shift driven by the "deinstitutionalization" policies of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS). This policy shift is deeply embedded within Ratchakan, which is translated and defined as "the Thai bureaucratic polity, characterized by its rigid institutional framework and vertical power structures," ensuring international readers gain immediate comprehension without ambiguity. While framed within the progressive discourse of "reintegration into family and community" to dismantle the segregation of traditional institutional care, the implementation of this policy often results in systemic abandonment for highly vulnerable populations.

A critical group requiring academic and practitioner attention is Thailand's "ART Generation." This population is clearly defined in this context as "the first cohort of youth who survived and transitioned into adulthood through Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART), but are now facing imminent displacement from the state welfare system upon reaching the threshold age of 18." Having contracted HIV through mother-to-child transmission and resided in state welfare institutions since childhood, this generation survived primarily due to free access to antiretroviral therapy under Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme (UC scheme). However, upon reaching the legal adulthood threshold of 18 years, institutional protection ceases. Under rigid deinstitutionalization exit mechanisms, these youth must leave residential care, and all material stipends are discontinued.

Consequently, these young adults are displaced into a highly unstable "liminal space". Mechanically, they remain tethered to specialized public hospital networks to maintain "biomedical compliance" for their health monitoring. Structurally, however, their entry into the competitive labour market is impeded by institutionalized screening mechanisms driven by corporate efficiency, cost containment, and implicit health-risk assessments. In an environment lacking robust anti-discrimination legislation, these youth experience acute livelihood compression.

This embodied survival struggle poses an epistemological challenge to conventional qualitative research paradigms. Macro-level institutional analyses rely heavily on policy metrics and structural

causality, frequently reducing complex biographical trajectories to resource deficits and obscuring the lived human experience. Conversely, micro-level qualitative approaches, such as classical Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), often focus extensively on individual psychological coping and subjective resilience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By treating institutional exclusion and policy shifts as static background variables, this approach risks reducing systemic transitions to matters of individual maladaptation, implicitly adopting a "blaming the victim" stance.

In qualitative inquiry, classical IPA is recognized for its commitment to an idiographic approach and the double hermeneutic process, mapping how social actors interpret experiences within their immediate lifeworld (Smith et al., 2009). For Thailand's "ART Generation," this paradigm resists clinical reductionism by positioning marginalized individuals as primary interpreters of their own lived experiences, rather than viewing them solely through clinical indicators. Despite its utility in capturing micro-level subjectivities, traditional IPA exhibits significant epistemological limitations when applied to populations experiencing systemic exclusion. First, institutional oppression and market exclusions operate independently of an actor's capacity for rational scrutiny. Objective macro forces shape life trajectories even if transitioning youth cannot fully articulate these covert mechanisms. Second, traditional IPA risks conflating systemic hardship with resilience. Structural exclusion often manifests as chronic bodily fatigue or learned helplessness rather than explicit legal prohibitions. By focusing exclusively on individual psychological coping or religious rationalization (Newman, Roungrakhon, & Tepjan, 2012), traditional IPA risks privatizing institutional failures and welfare retrenchment, reframing systemic discrimination as a variation in personal resilience.

According to international standards, social work research is a practice-based discipline oriented toward social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility. Social work epistemology operates by documenting marginalized lifeworld while simultaneously exposing the structural power relations that produce those conditions. While conventional phenomenology primarily addresses *what* an experience is (Heidegger, 1962), critical social work inquiry interrogates *why* specific structural arrangements make certain oppressive realities possible. Therefore, in response to this methodological fragmentation, the discipline of social work requires an analytically engaged framework.

To address this research gap, it is necessary to transcend the long-standing theoretical impasse between micro-phenomenological depth and macro-structural blind spots in qualitative inquiry. This study addresses this gap by investigating Structural Gravity of Lived Experience: Introducing "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA), thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of this research problem. By synthesizing structural reflexivity with idiographic depth, this methodological innovation offers profound significance for both qualitative methodology and social welfare practice. It not only equips researchers with a rigorous protocol to decode covert institutional and algorithmic oppressions but also provides crucial, structurally informed insights for policymakers to optimize transitional welfare mechanisms for highly vulnerable cohorts in the Global South.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are specified explicitly as follows:

1. To introduce "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA) and establish its core conceptual anchor, Structural Gravity, to resolve the theoretical impasse between phenomenological depth and structural blind spots in qualitative inquiry.
2. To operationalize and evaluate the analytical capacity and functionality of this triadic hermeneutic matrix prior to formal fieldwork by employing the Heuristic Vignette Method (Finch, 1987; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010) to construct a high-fidelity sandbox simulation model centred on a transitioning Thai youth.

3. Materials and Methods

To position "Structural Gravity" as a distinct conceptual framework, Table 1 delineates its analytical boundaries relative to established sociological paradigms, clarifying its specific utility for researching institutional transitions.

Table 1: Comparative Alignment Matrix of Structural Gravity versus Classical Paradigms

Theoretical Lens	Established Concept and Limitations	Explanatory Utility of "Structural Gravity"
Paul Farmer	Structural Violence Limitations: Tends to emphasize historical, continuous, and homogeneous deprivation within a single lifeworld; less equipped to capture sudden temporal disruptions caused by policy shifts.	Focuses on the interfaces of heterogeneous fields (e.g., state care vs. commercial markets), tracking localized, discontinuous institutional friction triggered by the sudden retrenchment of state protection (policy cliffs).
Pierre Bourdieu	Hysteresis Effect Limitations: Retains a micro-level focus on individual capacity, risking the attribution of transitional failures to personal capital deficits or the inertia of past habits.	Formulates an objective analysis that captures the asymmetric collision of incompatible institutional logics (biomedical compliance in public health vs. efficiency screening in commercial markets) on the individual.
Pierre Bourdieu	Symbolic Violence Limitations: Analytical endpoints frequently focus on individual "misrecognition" and passive subordination under dominant ideologies.	Systematically traces co-constitutive mechanisms: decoding how high-intensity subjective coping (e.g., localized religious merit-making) inadvertently absorbs systemic friction, thereby stabilizing oppressive macro-structures.

Table Note: This matrix establishes the conceptual boundaries of "Structural Gravity" by highlighting how it addresses the temporal, structural, and agentic limitations found in traditional theories during localized welfare transitions. Unlike paradigms that view structural oppression as continuous or purely ideological, Structural Gravity captures the acute administrative friction and automated exclusion mechanisms unique to contemporary institutional exits.

Structural Gravity operates through an interconnected network linking meso-level administrative routines with macro-level cultural discourses.

[Meso-Level: Ratchakan Culture] —> Rigid KPI Liquidation —> Abrupt Cessation of Care



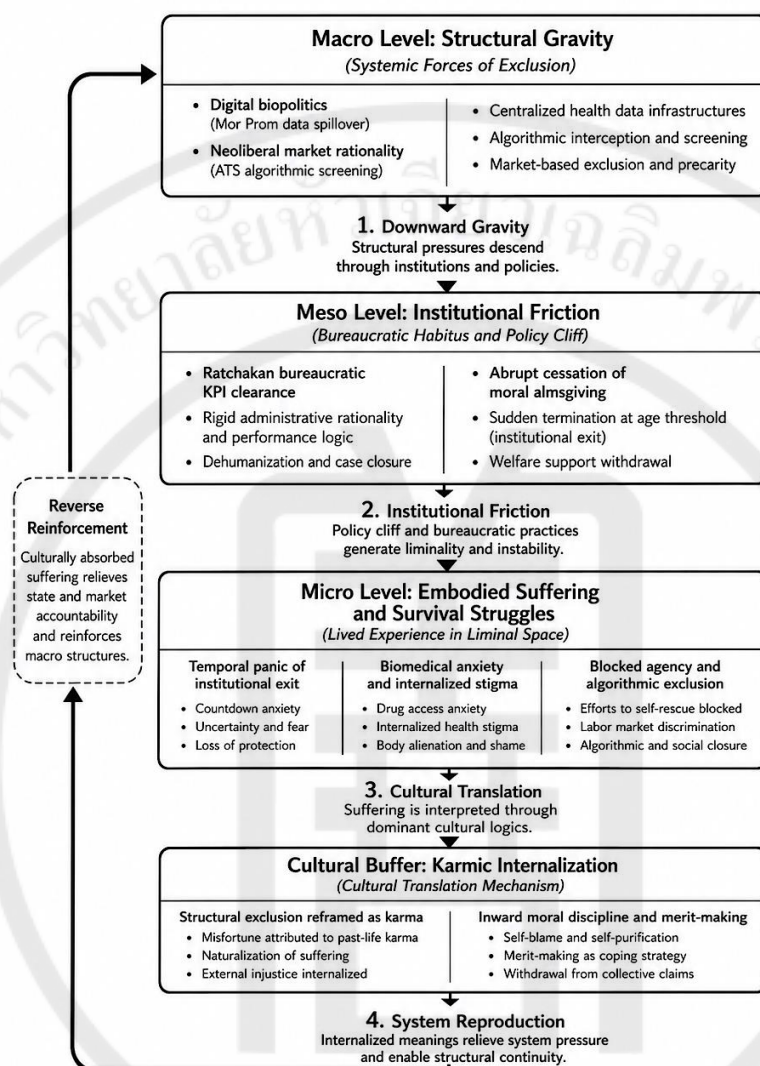
[Macro-Level: Karmic Rationalization] —> Inward Moral Attrib. —> Systemic Structural Buffer

Within state care facilities, administrative practices are often embedded in paternalistic dynamics, where statutory public welfare resources are reframed as expressions of institutional benevolence (*Metta*). Resource access is frequently contingent upon individual compliance and behavioural conformity, which restricts the development of autonomous social navigation skills. When macro deinstitutionalization mandates are translated into meso-level *Ratchakan* (state bureaucratic) performance metrics, administrative efficiency takes precedence over institutional care. To satisfy rigid case-closure quotas, the bureaucracy enforces an *Abrupt Cessation of Moral Almsgiving* precisely at the statutory threshold of 18, severed from the youth's actual transition readiness.

In the broader Thai social context, the downward pressures exerted by political-economic structures are often naturalized through localized cultural discourses. When transitioning youth encounter persistent barriers in the labour market, pervasive social narratives frequently invoke principles of karmic retribution (*Tam Kam* means reaping what one sowed in past lives) to explain contemporary hardship. This cultural framework encourages actors to adopt inward-looking self-examination and moral discipline. Consequently, systemic institutional dislocations are reframed as private moral destinies requiring individual resolution (such as allocating limited resources to temple merit-making). This cultural mechanism re-routes and absorbs systemic friction that would otherwise challenge state administrative and corporate employment structures.

To operationalize these conceptual connections into qualitative research protocols, the SW-IPA framework implements a triadic analytical matrix spanning micro, meso, and macro dimensions. Figure 1 illustrates the operational cycle of the SW-IPA model.

Figure 1. The Closed-Loop Structural Reproduction Model of SW-IPA



Note: SW-IPA (Social Work–Integrated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) links micro embodied suffering with meso institutional practices and macro structural forces in a closed-loop of reproduction.

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This diagram delineates the multi-layered analytical pathways and the self-stabilizing cycle of structural reproduction within the transitional welfare framework. The model operates through four sequential dynamics:

1. **Downward Gravity:** Structural pressures from the *Macro Level* (driven by digital biopolitics, centralized data systems, and algorithmic screening) descend into administrative routines.
2. **Policy Cliff:** At the *Meso Level*, these macro mandates are translated into rigid *Ratchakan* bureaucratic habits and case-closure KPIs, abruptly terminating institutional support and compressing individual life trajectories.
3. **Embodied Suffering:** At the *Micro Level*, transitioning individuals experience acute temporal panic, bodily alienation, and blocked agency, managing their marginalized identity through strategic emotional labour and stigma concealment.

4. Cultural Translation and Reverse Reinforcement: Through a *Cultural Buffer*, individual suffering is translated via native karmic logic (*Kam*), reframing structural exclusion as private moral destiny and self-blame. This internalization absorbs systemic friction, relieves state and corporate market entities of accountability, and ultimately loops back to reinforce and reproduce the original macro structures of exclusion.

4. Results

To assess the functionality of this matrix prior to formal field deployment, a triadic hermeneutic coding simulation was executed. The analysis centred on a high-fidelity heuristic profile: Anan, an 18-year-old youth residing in a public welfare institution, who contracted HIV via vertical transmission and faced imminent discharge under current deinstitutionalization rules (Pun Panich, Gorbach, Viengkham, Phanuphak, & Detels, 2015; Taisuwan & Chotthanapund, 2025).

Stage 1: Phenomenological Suspension (First Hermeneutics). Phenomenological suspension (*epoche*) was applied to document the subject's embodied experiences and immediate coping mechanisms, deliberately withholding macro-structural classifications.

Simulated Text Input (Anan's First-Person Narrative): "Only three months left until I turn 18. The director patted my shoulder in the hallway and told me that starting tomorrow, I need to figure out how to pay for my own medication, and I must move out of the dormitory by the end of next month. I don't know where I'll sleep. I submitted five resumes, but every single one requires a medical certificate proving no infectious diseases. My hands shake when filling them out. If they find out I am 'that kind of person' (an HIV carrier), what will I do? Maybe this is just my destiny."

Coding Output (First-Order Themes): [Temporal Panic], [Biomedical Vulnerability], [Spatial Insecurity/Homelessness], [Stigma Internalization & Identity Concealment].

Stage 2: Institutional Deconstruction (Second Hermeneutics). First-order themes were positioned within meso-level institutional routines to evaluate how *Ratchakan* structures and paternalistic habits influenced compliance.

Simulated Text Input (Institutional Case Logbook Summary): "Anan has been an exceptionally obedient and respectful child since infancy, always performing the *Wai* to express gratitude to elders. We ensured his participation in temple activities on every Buddhist holiday, which fulfils institutional regulations and reflects our benevolence (*Metta*) toward him as merit-makers. However, as he is reaching 18, according to the latest deinstitutionalization (DI) indicators from MSDHS, his record must be closed in this month's administrative tables. This aligns with state regulations and *Ratchakan* duties. Our institutional care is complete, and he must now learn to navigate his own karmic trajectory (Coping with Karma)."

Analytical Interpretation: The subject's behavioural compliance and limited social navigation skills were produced not by inherent personality traits, but by sustained exposure to dependency-inducing institutional care. When macro deinstitutionalization mandates were converted into rigid bureaucratic indicators, administrative processing overrode transitional care, resulting in an abrupt cessation of support.

Coding Output (Second-Order Institutional Labels): [Paternalistic Welfare Cultivation], [Ratchakan Case-Closure Liquidation], [Meso-Level Cessation of Care].

Stage 3: Structural Synthesis (Third Hermeneutics). Micro-narratives and institutional logs were evaluated alongside macro-structural dynamics to analyse how contemporary digital practices transformed interpersonal market barriers into automated screening processes.

Simulated Text Input (Job-Seeking Narratives juxtaposed with Corporate ATS Documentation):

Source A (Transitional Youth Interview): "Over the last three months, I sent out more than 80 applications through my phone... Every time I click 'Agree to Digital Background Check' and submit, the system status updates to 'Application Terminated' or 'Not Aligned' within seconds. I cannot secure an interview with a human manager... It feels like an invisible digital wall."

Source B (Corporate Applicant Tracking System [ATS] Technical Documentation): "The platform integrates background risk-management modules to

optimize labour efficiency. It automatically flags profiles indicating high-frequency medical follow-ups or specific public health tracking facilities to reduce long-term human resource volatility..."

Analytical Interpretation: The "invisible digital wall" encountered by the applicant was operated as an expression of digital biopolitics within contemporary administrative systems. While state initiatives like the *Mor Prom* platform provided necessary digital health tracking and treatment integration for HIV management, these centralized data structures interfaced with commercial risk-assessment algorithms. Consequently, health metrics functioned as screening criteria within competitive labour markets, creating automated barriers to employment prior to face-to-face interaction.

Coding Output (Third-Order Macro Propositions): [Biopolitical Data Spillover], [Automated Algorithmic Exclusion], [Digital Pre-emption of Market Entry].

Simulation Synthesis: Asymmetric Structural Collisions. Integrating these three analytical stages reveals how systemic imbalances shape outcomes. To elaborate on this point, it is evident that "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA) establishes its core conceptual anchor, Structural Gravity, to resolve the theoretical impasse between phenomenological depth and structural blind spots in qualitative inquiry. The simulation demonstrates that transitional difficulties are less a function of personal resource deficits or individual maladaptation, and more an outcome of the asymmetric interface between institutional policy shifts and market screening mechanisms within the transitional environment.

Table 2: Mapping the Asymmetric Interface of Policy Cliffs and Market Barriers

Analytical Axis	Micro-Level Agency Responses	Meso-Macro Structural Mechanics	Structural Gravity Outcomes
Welfare Exit Phase	The individual attempts to acquire technical skills (e.g., electronic repair) and conceals health status to facilitate market entry.	State care structures terminate residential placement and material stipends based on age thresholds (Policy Cliff).	Immediate reduction of livelihood options, increasing the risk of housing and financial instability.
Labor Market Entry	The individual maintains high job-application volume and performs intensive emotional management during search processes.	Employment platforms mandate digitized health declarations and utilize automated screening algorithms (Market Barrier).	Systematic filtering of applicants with chronic conditions, leading to underemployment and skills depreciation.
Cultural Ideology	The individual seeks to resist social stigma but experiences distress from repeated rejections, eventually turning to localized religious practices (<i>Tam Boon</i>).	Dominant cultural discourses align with market concepts of individual accountability, associating hardship with personal karmic trajectories (Ideological Naturalization).	The individual internalizes structural barriers as personal destiny, shifting focus away from structural critiques and stabilizing the institutional status quo.

5. Discussion

The simulation results demonstrate how SW-IPA expands upon classical assumptions in qualitative inquiry by explicitly linking micro subjectivities to institutional routines and macro forces. To fully interpret the implications of these current simulated findings, the discussion must draw upon empirical research within the fields of transitional welfare and marginalized public health trajectories. Empirical studies focusing on Thailand's institutionalized HIV-infected adolescents transitioning to adulthood (e.g., Pun Panich, Gorbach, Viengkham, Phanuphak, & Detels, 2015) confirm that structural barriers and sudden institutional exits severely disrupt social adaptation, validating that the "policy cliff" simulated in Anan's case is a critical empirical reality rather than a mere theoretical construct.

Furthermore, empirical evidence regarding the employment and wages of people living with chronic health conditions (García-Gómez, Labeaga, & Oliva, 2014) corroborates that automated algorithmic screenings and health-risk exclusions operate as objective macro forces that systematically compress livelihood options prior to any human interaction. By anchoring the SW-IPA model within these empirical realities, we can interpret that individual survival struggles are heavily modulated by "Structural Gravity." Instead of viewing individual coping strategies, such as localized religious merit-making or spiritual rationalization (Newman, Rongprakhon, & Tepjan, 2012). Solely as signs of psychological resilience, empirical synthesis indicates that these localized cultural practices often inadvertently absorb systemic friction. Consequently, they relieve state bureaucracies and corporate entities of structural accountability, thereby stabilizing the oppressive institutional status quo.

To ensure human subject protection during actual field execution, three layers of safeguards are mandatory:

1. Multi-Layered De-identification Protocol: Beyond the standard use of pseudonyms for individual participants, social workers, and corporate entities, the names of specific care facilities and exact community geographic coordinates must be modified to prevent deductive identification within localized social networks.
2. Processual and Contextual Informed Consent: Consent must be treated as an ongoing process rather than a single event. The research team will re-verify verbal consent at critical transitional junctures, such as immediate post-discharge or following encounters with labour market screening processes.
3. Trauma-Informed Research Controls: If the interview process triggers acute psychological distress regarding institutional exit or market exclusion, data collection will be paused immediately. The research team has established formal referral pathways with local non-governmental organizations and public hospital psychological support units to provide immediate care if required.

These methodological controls ensure that while the framework penetrates macro algorithmic and political-economic exclusions, the safety of the vulnerable research participants remains primary. Future qualitative research can build on these observations by using SW-IPA to analyse other marginalized cohorts experiencing high-friction administrative exits in the Global South.

6. Conclusion

The "Social Work Integrated Phenomenological Analysis" (SW-IPA) framework incorporates the concept of Structural Gravity to expand upon traditional qualitative methodologies that risk individualizing structural failures. By applying this triadic hermeneutic model to the transition dynamics of Thailand's "ART Generation," this paper examined how state welfare retrenchment and digitized market screening mechanisms can interact to produce marginalization, and how traditional cultural narratives can inadvertently obscure these systemic dynamics. Methodologically, this framework offers a structured, transparent, and reflexive protocol for studying vulnerable populations navigating institutional transitions in the Global South.

At the policy level, these findings suggest that when agencies like the MSDHS implement deinstitutionalization strategies, the policy conclusions should be restructured into concrete, actionable mechanisms as follows: Extending the Welfare Age Threshold: It is recommended that the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) extend the institutional care and welfare eligibility ceiling from 18 to 21 years old specifically for transitional youth with chronic health conditions (e.g., the ART Generation). This extension provides a necessary legislative buffer to directly mitigate the destabilizing impact of the "policy cliff." Furthermore, these empirical insights necessitate the development of robust regulatory frameworks to address algorithmic discrimination in employment, thereby mitigating the systemic pressures that compound marginalization. Future research should focus on implementing empirical trials of this protocol in diverse geographical and socio-political settings to optimize transitional welfare policies.

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