



# Understanding Social Identification of Disability in Thai Society: From the Lived Experience of Blind Street Musicians

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## Abstract

Understandings of disability are socially constructed. Societal values system governs public perceptions of, and interactions with, people with disabilities across their lives. This paper aims to report on a qualitative study of the lived experience of blind street musicians in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region, in particular focusing on their interpretations about how the public view them, their reflections about themselves as people with disabilities and their reactions to their circumstances. Analysis of the individual interviews with twenty-three men and fourteen women indicates that Buddhist beliefs in Thai culture construct social identity for blind street musicians as people with disabilities, instigate paternalistic views and unequal social relationships towards them and their capacities as people with disabilities, and lead to them losing their sense of pride and human dignity. Thai Buddhist notions of disability, especially relating to the law of Karma, represent people having impairments as those committing a sin in their past or early life, and being subjected to deserved punishment in their present life. These participants also observed that public attitudes and responses towards themselves as people with disabilities were discriminatory that impeded their economic and social opportunities, given that they looked different and inferior. All these resulted in them feeling self-alienated, lacking self-confidence and self-respect. However, these participants seemed to react to their situations in one of these ways: positively, negatively, and pragmatically, based on the extent of their interpretation of Buddhism and their recognition of human rights. Promoting public awareness of disability, individual capabilities, rights and dignity, therefore, is necessitated.

**Key words:** Buddhism; discrimination; human rights; public awareness; Thai culture