Understanding vulnerability and resilience in the context of poverty and ethnicity in Vietnam

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research among Kinh, Hmong and Cham H'Roi children in the highlands of Vietnam in 2008, this paper presents a narrative analysis of how poverty and ethnicity affect children's experience of adversity. It explores the meanings children give to their experience and their use of discursive strategies such as criticizing displays of wealth to create a repertoire of meanings from which personal and collective resilience is drawn. Acknowledging the ambiguities and contradictions in children's accounts, the author reflects on how their understanding of social differences is underpinned by local power structures.

Introduction

> Two years ago there was a time of severe cold. One of our buffalos could not bear it; it slipped and fell down the hill. Poor thing! My father said we should not have to take the loan were we able to sell it. I have never let a buffalo fall when it's my turn [for cattle tending]. (Hmong girl)
>
> Last winter was freezing cold. Yet [the Hmong] keep letting their children tend the cattle up in the hills. Two girls were found dead, holding each other. The

> layers of torn clothes they were wearing were too thin; they must have tried to warm each other. No one cared. (Kinh woman)

These two quotes were collected during fieldwork in Lao Cai province in 2008, from a 14-year-old Hmong girl and a middle-aged Kinh woman (the majority ethnic group in Vietnam), respectively. The Kinh woman depicted Hmong children as helpless victims of nature and human neglect. The Hmong child, in contrast, demonstrated her awareness of the consequences of severe weather, and emphasized her resourcefulness in continuing to tend cattle despite the cold to help lessen family hardship. While weather was a strong theme in both quotes, my focus is on the allusions to poverty and ethnicity. Poverty was presented in both stories, but in the former, financial hardship was discussed as something avoidable and of known cause, while the latter description was coloured by critical judgment. While ethnicity was not explicit, the substantive differences suggest variations in views about what it means to be a member of a minority ethnic group in the context of poverty.

The above interpretations may suffer from my (researcher's) bias. To tackle the problem of what Boyden and Mann call 'limited interpretation' in researching children's resilience (2005: p. 11), I resisted bringing to the field preconceived ideas of vulnerability and resilience.[1] This article presents children's narratives of their experience of adversity in the context of poverty and ethnicity in upland Vietnam. It pays special attention to the ways in which children appropriate and reinterpret language (Bakhtin, 1981) and the wide range of meanings they give to their experience reflecting shared cultural frameworks. Focusing on children's 'agency of intention' - a sense of having a project in life (Ortner, 2001) - the paper seeks to understand children's discursive strategies in creating a repertoire of meanings from which personal and

collective resilience is drawn. It also reveals ambiguity and contradictions in children's accounts that reinforce their existing knowledge of how social differences are underpinned by local power structures. The paper draws on extended conversations with twelve 13 to 14-year-old Kinh, Hmong and Cham H'Roi children, several group activities and ethnographic observations at home, school and workplace in Lao Cai and Phu Yen provinces as part of Young Lives' qualitative research in 2008.[2]

Children as Social Agents, Language as Social Action

This research rests on two premises: firstly, children are social agents capable of perceiving and acting on their situation (James and James, 2004; Mayall, 2002), and secondly, children's talk is social action that both constructs and is constructed by their reality. It is no longer tenable to conceptualize children as passive subjects nor as defenseless victims in the face of adversity. Children have been shown to have their own understanding of their circumstances, which at times differs from adults' views, as well as their own ways of addressing challenges facing themselves and their families (Woodhead, 2004; Boyden and others, 1998).

In relation to children's social agency, language becomes a form of social action where children simultaneously come to understand and change their reality (Ahearn, 2001). Some linguistic anthropologists interested in child agency take Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic approach, which highlights children's appropriation of adults' and others' utterances[3] during their active participation in shared activity. Ungar has suggested using discourse analysis to increase our understanding of children's resilience (2005: p.

xxvii) by turning a keen ‘ear’ to the ways in which children rework words and expressions, both reflecting the reality they live in and also constructing it.

First, some caution in attributing agency and handling contradictions is in order. To say children have agency does not necessarily mean they act of their own free will or resist their conditions and the dominant interpretations of these conditions. To guard ourselves from the temptation of romanticizing agency, it is important not to lose sight of 'the structural conditions that shape childhood' or 'the differential impacts that societal forces [...] have on childhood' (James, 2007: pp. 269-70). Agency is constituted by the ‘norms, practices, institutions, and discourses’ that enable it to function (Lalu, 2000: p. 51) and is therefore linguistically and socio-culturally mediated. Not all stories that children tell can be characterized as ‘counter narratives’ reflecting their oppositional agency or resistance. On the contrary, as Paul Willis shows in his classic ethnography, working class children's participation in countercultures at school may at the same time reduce their options in the future and thus perpetuate the existing social order (1977). Instead of focusing on a heroic ‘agency of resistance’, this paper seeks an understanding of ‘agency of intention’, defined following Sherry Ortner as children's 'projects in the world and their ability to formulate and enact them' (2001: p. 78). We therefore examine how children articulate their intentions and how these may be limited by structural constraints.

Finally, there are contradictions in social relations and in what children and adults actually do; to understand these necessitates 'ethnographic particulars, close descriptions of concrete interactional practice'. Boyden finds Ethiopian children's perspectives on their daily roles and responsibility at times contradictory and notes that it is not always straightforward 'to distinguish between risk and protection, resilience and endurance,

agency and obligation' (2009). Ambiguity and contradictions have long been emphasised by sociolinguists in understanding the development of mind and social persona (versions of the self presented in particular contexts) through discourse. An analysis of children's discursive practice allows, as James Collins suggests, 'for dilemmas and intractable oppositions' and 'creative, discursive agency in conditions prestructured [...] but also fissured in unpredictable and dynamic ways' (1993: p. 132).

Experience of Adversity, Meanings of Resilience

The balance of agency and structure requires researchers to start from children's experiences of adversity and work towards an understanding of the meanings children make of their own and others' resilience. At the same time, viewing children as social agents requires a shift away from an individually based conceptualization of resilience toward a contextually situated or cultural framework (Wright and Masten, 2006). If we accept that humans are biologically constituted as social beings, it is necessary to explore the experience of a child not as a separate self but in relation to family members, peers, and community. It follows that resilience is also constructed through a process of children's interaction in their social environment. While resilience may be expressed individually, it is also relational and at times collective. Relational resilience has been explored among girls and women and in indigenous communities (Jordan, 2006; Hernnandez, 2002). This paper shows how in the remote and mountainous highlands of Vietnam agency is not confined to an individual child but at times 'extends beyond the skin' (Wertsch and others, 1993: p. 352) through the mediation of a common language.

The meanings children give to their own experience are thoroughly informed by their cultural frameworks, the cultural norms and beliefs shared by members of their ethnic group or neighborhood. The values and feelings children associate with work, for instance, vary across ethnic groups, genders, and in relation to different types of work (Woodhead, 2004). In the same vein, the meanings of continuing at or dropping out of school differ markedly between ethnic majority and minority children (Truong, forthcoming). Social and cultural contexts, therefore, are more than a backdrop upon which children's narratives are projected; they should be seen from children's perspectives, and in relation to their experiences of social inequality.

The Research

Twelve 13-14 year old boys and girls of Kinh, Hmong, and H'Roi ethnic groups, selected as a sub-sample for qualitative research from Young Lives were the participants of this research. Lao Cai province, home of the Hmong children in this sample, ranks in the bottom ten in average income per capita among Vietnam's 64 provinces and cities. Phu Yen stands approximately half-way in the provincial poverty ranking partly thanks to the incorporation of relatively better-off coastal areas. However, ethnic minority groups living in the highlands comprise only five per cent of households in the province, but 17 per cent of the poor.[4]

The Hmong are the eighth largest minority ethnic group in Vietnam (800,000 people in 1999, approximately one per cent of the population).[5] As a small Cham group living in the foothills of the Central Highlands, the H'Roi share more cultural features with

neighboring ethnic groups than with their coastal Hindu- and/or Islam-influenced ethnic counterparts.[6]

This research was carried out in Lao Cai and Phu Yen between October and December 2008 with a team of five anthropologists who stayed for a week with each child and their family. Researchers brought small gifts of thanks for the families and provided basic goods such as rice to ensure they did not eat into the family's supplies. During their home stays researchers kept detailed field notes, but did not use audio recorders in case this affected their rapport with participants. They were trained using a common set of guidelines but did not use set interview schedules. They usually communicated directly with adults and children but in some cases, e.g. conversing with grandparents, they needed to use siblings or friends as interpreters to rephrase their questions for clarification. This intensive interaction in a constant search for effective communication created opportunities to probe deeper into children's own views, which were supplemented by the attention paid to non-verbal interactions in the researchers' field notes.

Personal and Shared Experience of Adversity

This section explores how children give meaning to their experience of adversity and that of their peers. Children's work, as told by children of all ethnic groups in this research, is not seen as an adversity but a way to overcome adversity. What merits attention here is a diversity of values and feelings associated with work, ranging from an idiom of help and support among Kinh, to a major household production role among children from ethnic minorities.

In Children's Own Terms: Hardship, Threats, and Insecurity

Poverty and its manifestations such as hunger or lack of food, clothes and resources are rarely discussed in children's daily talk. Words such as 'hunger' (*doi*) or 'shortage' (*thieu*) were hardly mentioned. When asked to compare their current state of life with that of a few years ago, a H'Roi girl recalled that they had fewer dishes at a meal. A Hmong girl, as a way of wishing me a good appetite at meals, said in an apologetic tone that they did not have enough vegetables. In fact green pakchoy was a constant presence while pork fat, dried fish, or ground nuts alternated. However, the girl's polite comment was an attempt to excuse the modest means of her family.

Children discuss hardship in relational terms, i.e. adverse conditions affecting their family members, not necessarily themselves. In recollecting the most difficult time of their life, H'Mai and H'Lien, two H'Roi girls, talked about an illness of a family member. Having their mothers admitted to hospital was the time of ultimate fear and sadness. H'Lien thought of the kidney disease of her elder brother and the intellectual disability of her junior sister as common challenges in her family, and her help was needed to lighten the workload. Hardship is viewed in familial terms; children as individuals are conscious of their share and join in to lessen it.

While household chores and agricultural tasks are the most common forms of work for children of all ethnic groups, which they describe as help to their family, there are variations in the degree of intensity. For the minority, 'to go to work' (*di lam*) literarily means doing agricultural tasks on a regular basis, whereas Kinh children describe their involvement in rice transplanting and harvest as supplementary. Moreover, Hmong and

H'Roi children always elaborate on the volume of work done, the quantity produced, or money earned, as in H'Lien's and Lan's words:

> This plot is for growing beans. During harvest, my mother and I worked for three days and brought home seven and a half sacks of beans. I delivered the beans to the factory. It was the first time I drove a motorbike and the bean sacks were so heavy it was hard to balance and drive.(H'Lien, a H'Roi girl)

> Apart from working in our own fields, my sisters and I joined [together] to grow maize in a plot of my uncle. Since his family settled downstream his land was left fallow here in the uphill. We collected few hundred thousand *dong* from the sale of the harvest.[7] We went to the marketplace and hung out. We gave money to mother in the end (Lan, a Hmong girl).

In contrast, Kinh children in both Phu Yen and Lao Cai rarely elaborate beyond the list of tasks. Moreover, they make a clear distinction between cattle tending, and feeding pigs or poultry that can be done while playing at the backyard. This difference in children's views of work across ethnic groups is informed by the ecological and technological conditions in which they operate: cattle tending for the minority children entails long hours far from home whereas pig and poultry feeding fits in the household chores of the Kinh. Although the work can be just as hard as that of their ethnic minority peers, Kinh children tend to view their jobs as seasonal and subsidiary. In contrast, ethnic minority children see their work as a major resource that they bring to their family.

The same idiom of work as help, as described above, may vary between majority and minority children in their perception of its worth and in their feelings associated with

work. The diversity in children's views and feelings about work in this study parallels what Woodhead (2004) and Boyden and others (1998) describe. It is misleading, however, to relate this to differences in agency between children of one ethnicity or another. Children's agency of intention here rests in the ability to distinguish and articulate the distinction of work to which children give particular meanings drawn from their social and cultural world.

Unlike work that is considered by children of all ethnic groups as a form of contribution to their family, early marriage among ethnic minority teenagers is viewed as something undesirable, yet often imposed by family circumstances. Tuyet, a 13 year old Kinh girl, talked of her H'Roi friend's marriage with empathy:

> As soon as H'Nga and I met we became very close friends. We were sitting at the same table. She seemed never sad and always smiled. We talked and giggled a lot. Then came a time when she missed class for three or four days. Friends from the village said she got married. [...] That took me aback. How could I believe that H'Nga got married! Since then we have not met. I miss her and would love to see her (Tuyet, Kinh girl).

Lan, the Hmong girl introduced in an earlier passage, considered a union between a girl of her age and a divorced elder man a pity:

> Lan - A friend of mine married a couple of years now.
>
> Interviewer - *How old was she when she got married?*
>
> Lan - I don't remember. Now she already has a second child.
>
> Interviewer - *Really?*
>
> Lan - The first child died prematurely. [...] She married someone else's husband.

Interviewer - *How so?*

Lan - The man had a wife and abandoned her.

Interviewer - *Did her parents let her marry?*

Lan - No, they didn't. She went to school down at the foothill and was pulled [by him].[8] He did not ask the parents but just took her. It was impossible for her not to marry him, so she did. She is his third wife. He stays with her now.

On another occasion when Lan talked about the effects of spirits, she returned to the story of her married friend as an example of having an unfavorable karma. Unsettled spirits or ghosts, according to Lan, could prevent a girl from growing into full puberty or put her through a difficult marriage and childbirth. Children's views of risk are embedded in a socio-cultural framework embraced by their community; in this case the connection between spiritual and living worlds and disapproving attitudes toward broken marriages.

Not all married teenagers live in misery. Anh, a Hmong girl and the only married child in our sample, appeared to be in good terms with her mother-in-law. Married at the age of 14, Anh's ease in the new home conveyed her relief at leaving her natal family where she reportedly did most of the work and her mother openly favored her half-siblings. Our researcher noted during her stay that the mother-in-law bought two similar skirts for her daughter and Anh. Anh did not comment, but was delighted to be treated equally. However idiosyncratic Anh's story is, it warns against over-generalisation and a tendency to view children's marriage wholly negatively. It points to the benefit of qualitative inquiry into children's experience and the importance of contextual

sensitivity in both accessing and addressing children's problems (Ungar and Teram, 2005; Swaine, 2004).

'Something we share, don't we?'

Earlier in this section we discussed children's diverse understanding of work, hardship, and adversity in the family context. Experience of adversity is also a shared experience among children outside of the home, as in the case of school discontinuity.

Tuyet, a 13 year old Kinh girl, described her H'Roi classmates dropping out of school one after another as follows:

> Most of my classmates from Grade 5 have left school by now, I can't remember how many of them. Well, all of them [left]. There was one girl who continued for a semester, but then she married. Another two girls completed Grade 6, but I have not seen them going to Grade 7. They have probably dropped out too (Tuyet, a Kinh girl).

This 'chain effect' of dropping out also featured in the accounts of ethnic minority children. H'Mai recalled that two of her friends-cum-relatives left school about the same time as she did and explained that she came to the same decision partly because she no longer had company. While school drop-outs might not consult each other beforehand, their decisions are peer-influenced. School discontinuity of ethnic minority children might not intentional collective action, but their individual participation culminated in a shared experience that cut across age groups. Not completing schooling has effectively become a signifier of identity among ethnic minority youths that is

adopted by ethnic minority children themselves and also used as a label by their majority counterparts (Truong, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, H'Roi school drop-outs remained friends, as H'Phuong put it: 'We who face the same difficulties have compassion for each other. Being poor and having difficulties are something we share, don't we?' This was one of the rare occasions when the word 'poor' was uttered. Following Bakhtin's suggestion to look at the specific mode of language appropriation we noted that H'Phuong made the word 'poor' her own by giving it specific meanings: the emphasis is not so much on being poor, but on the shared experience between friends, which in turn provides a binding source of compassion. Her message was strengthened by the use of an emphatic tag-question ('don't we?'). Meanwhile, by conjuring a sense of community, she transformed a narrative of adversity to one of resilience (Ungar, 2001). This moment captures an extension of a child's agency to that of her group (Wertsch and others, 1993). While this may not be an instance of collective agency, it testifies that in their intricate interrelationships with one another, children act both as agents and as 'instruments' of other agents (Inden, 1990: p. 23).

Negotiating Resilience

Children's narratives show that through daily conversations children constitute and impart meanings to their reality; these meanings are informed by children's material conditions and socio-cultural frameworks. We now turn to children's discursive strategies in negotiating resilience and explore the contradictions between agency, structure, and language that underlie children's perspectives and practice. To this end,

Ungar's (2001) approach of narrative therapy is instructive and the discursive strategies adopted by children in our study reflect a number of components identified in his approach (e.g., reflection and criticism or challenging).[9]

When children were asked to complete a sentence 'describing your neighborhood' in a group setting, they were highly critical of representations of their daily lives. Hmong and H'Roi children respond with an alternative narrative to dominant representations presenting ethnic minority ways of living as backward. Their narrative emphasises the wealth of nature and human sentiments from which they draw personal and collective strength. This can to some extent be seen as a counter-narrative to that of the poverty of ethnic minority children (Truong, forthcoming). If resilience is understood as a capacity to bounce back in the face of adversity, ethnic minority children's talking about the alternative wealth of their community is one way to reject their incorporation within a pervasive popular narrative of poverty and backwardness. Students from the ethnic majority tend to view the performance of their minority counterparts in pejorative terms, as reflected in Tuyet's recollection of one of her H'Roi classmates:

> Our teacher asked better pupils to help the laggards. I was assigned to help H'Vy. When she opened a book she could not read a word. The teacher gave a very short poem and asked her to memorize. Two weeks later she could not recite it! The teacher did not punish her; she would do so immediately if it were one of us [Kinh pupils]. Her maths was terrible, too. She had to use fingers and could not count in her head. She had only one set of uniform and the white shirt turned yellowish. They [H'Roi friends] say they bath everyday, but I don't know why, they are kind of dirty (Tuyet, a Kinh girl).

In a separate conversation, H'Phuong directly confronted this predominantly negative narrative: 'I did not leave school because I was a bad student; I did quite well in fact. [...] Had [my family] had the right conditions, I would have gone on and fulfill my dream [of becoming a teacher].' However, ethnic minority children's narratives of their experience of schooling are not without contradictions. The same girl, H'Phuong, in a group discussion on classroom abuse, condoned teachers' behaviors: '[They] beat [us] because we were too dumb; they couldn't teach us, they must punish us then.' This is one of the instances of heteroglossia or multiple voices in a single utterance when the voice of power prevails in children's discourse, underpinned by the power structures in the classroom and in children's daily life.[10] Even when children act as what Inden calls 'the recipients of the act of others,' they remain debating agents with clear messages to convey, or an intention (1990: p. 23). It is this agency of intention that enables children to make sense of and make use of the dominant discourse and thereby create for themselves a sphere of relatively autonomous action and self-determination.

Using counter-narrative as a discursive strategy, or tactic, in de Certeau's (1984) terms, empowers children in the process of resilience building and thereby strengthens the community that nurtures this resilience.[11] Another way to talk back at poverty is to directly criticize ill-gotten wealth in general and the ostentatious lifestyle of some overindulged teenagers. This strategy is practiced by children of all ethnic groups. Kinh girls criticised teenagers in their neighborhood who 'go with the flow' (*dua doi*) and their parents for neglecting their bad deeds. Huy, a 13 year old Kinh boy, when talking about possible future jobs, commented that 'if a government official has a lot of money or large house, he must have stolen people's money.' At a coffee shop in town where I took a H'Roi girl out for a chat, she was particularly curious about the Kinh

girls at the next table, and noted their hair, shoes, bags, cellular phones, and foul language. She commented disapprovingly about the girls' 'boy-like' flamboyance. Interestingly, as researchers staying in the homes of children participants during fieldwork we were also seen as exotic, but the children made a distinction between the two kinds of ostentation. Children were proud during our leisurely walks along the village road but were critical towards the ostentatious display of the Kinh girls, possibly due to suspicion of the source of their families' wealth.

The understanding of dialogue used in this paper means not only straightforward verbal exchange or conversation, but also a social field containing multiple voices and logics (Ahearn, 2001). Children participating in our research engage in a debate among themselves, with or without direct conversations, over the significance of their attempts to end the cycle of poverty. The life story of H'Duyen, the first and only H'Roi teacher in Ea Mua, typifies individual efforts to break the barrier to achievement posed by ethnic stereotyping (Truong, forthcoming). However, her narrative of resilience is probably not shared by teenagers who did not know her personally or associate themselves with her story. This limitation on future job aspirations among children of all ethnic groups, reflected in the criticism of white collar jobs by Huy, a Kinh boy, points to a lack of alternative narratives of resilience. The reservoir of meanings from which children draw their individual and collective strength does not necessarily contain the best materials.

Conclusion

I began this paper by refusing to provide preconceived definitions of vulnerability and resilience, preferring to arrive at an understanding of children's perspectives and experience through their narratives. This small research sample brings into focus the diversity in perspectives and experience across ethnic groups and highlights their subtlety, thus keeping over-generalisation at bay.

One thing, nevertheless, that arises from children's narratives is their intention: their self-awareness, their ability to distinguish and articulate distinction, including criticism, a sense of having a message to convey, and an argument to put forth. The analysis demonstrates how this agency of intention can be recognized through a dialogical approach that identifies both the discursive and non-verbal strategies that children adopt to construct individual and collective resilience in daily life. It would be far-fetched, however, to characterise these strategies as children's agency of resistance. Children's counter-narratives do challenge the mainstream narrative, but they do not target the structural conditions that shape social inequality and ethnic stereotypes or seek to change them. Moreover, their exercise of agency at times contributes to reinforcing pre-existing social inequalities. Ambiguity and contradictions remain in the discourse and practice of children as they navigate through daily life. Their persistence reminds us of the powerful shaping force of the local socio-economic, political and cultural structures within which children's agency takes form (James, 2007; Hart, 2008).

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[1] The concept of resilience covers a wide range of phenomena, from the ability to 'bounce back' from stress and trauma to sustained competence under threat and good outcomes despite high-risk status (Masten and others, 1990). See Kaplan (2006) for a critique.

[2] Young Lives is a study of the changing nature of childhood poverty. The lives of 12,000 children growing up in four developing countries -- Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam -- are tracked over 15 years (www.younglives.org.uk).

[3] Bakhtin's dialogic approach is built on a premise that language and human thoughts and actions always exist in a state of being 'addressed' and in the process of 'answering,' that is, dialogic (Bakhtin 1981).

[4] Phu Yen People's Committee, Report of the Poverty Alleviation Program of 2001-2005 and Plan for 2006-2010.

[5] General Statistics Office http://www.gso.gov.vn/ [accessed on 15 August 2009].

[6] The Cham (population 132,000 in 1999) speak a Malayo-Polyneasian language and live in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (General Statistics Office http://www.gso.gov.vn/ [accessed on 15 August 2009]).

[7] 1 USD = 18,378 VND as of December 2008.

[8] During our research we could not verify the popularity of this 'hand-pulling' practice that was largely regarded by officials and teachers as backward. Hmong parents, however, tended to see this as a legitimate courtship among youths.

[9] Narrative therapy is a process through which resilience previously disguised as vulnerability is restored and fortified (Ungar 2001).

[10] Heteroglossia involves situations when different languages, or voices, and perspectives are inscribed with varying degrees of authority (Bakhtin 1981).

[11] De Certeau (1984) distinguishes between strategies and tactics; the former form the operational mechanisms of power holders in a society, and the latter are creative knowledges and practices that subvert the pervasive power structure.