Abstract

The reconstruction of Cambodia since the 1990s has configured a volatile social space characterized by economic growth, rapidly changing structural conditions, weak state institutions, cultural revitalization and change, and globalization forces. The life-course context for young people is marked by weak institutional framework, strong reliance on family support, high social mobility, renegotiated cultural norms, and globalized politico-economic agenda. Based on first results of interview material from an on-going project examining biographical experiences of two major groups of young people in Cambodia, migrant labor workers and prospective university graduates, this paper attempts to construct a typology of biographical expectations among contemporary youth. The variation in patterns of biographical expectations will offer empirical evidence of how the institutional, cultural and structural contexts are experienced and appreciated by young Cambodians, potentially illustrating the interplay of action and structure in biographical constructions.

Key words: transitional society, biographical expectations, youth, Cambodia

Introduction

In a transitional society, the shifting structural conditions, weak state institutions, cultural revitalization and change, and globalization forces give rise to an emergent and volatile social space. How do young people negotiate such social volatility? How do they form expectations about their future? And how do they reinvent their society? Using Cambodia as a case study, this paper will examine how Cambodian youths translate their experiences of social volatility and personal resources into biographical expectations in a transitional society characterized by rapid social transformation, absence of strong institutional framework, and intense pressure of globalized neoliberal market processes. I will explore the variations in young people’s patterns of biographical expectations through an empirically grounded typology of ideal types (Weber 1949), which characterize how the biographical experiences and constructions reflect the current institutional, cultural and structural dynamics.

The Cambodian context

Following three decades of protracted violent conflicts and international isolation, Cambodia in the early 1990s emerged from the ‘ashes of the past’ through the United Nations’ intervention for peace and democratic reform, while the national reconstruction and social development processes were banked on a politico-economic agenda of market liberalization. On the one hand, the political stability and social development have generally been cast by
Cambodians in contrast to the past upheavals and destruction, generating prevailing optimism for better lives. On the other, the present context is not only informed by traditional socio-cultural expectations but also intimately linked to the transnational forces and discourses such as global market dynamics and values.

Traditionally, Cambodian society was characterized by a deep sense of predetermined positions within a given social order, manifesting in such entrenched notions as ‘small’ and ‘big’ people and urban-rural divide, as a result of one’s deeds from past actions or lives (Chandler 1979). Cambodian individuals must either be content with one’s socio-cultural class position or improve it through ‘merit-making’ to move up the hierarchical order within countless incarnations in the earthly world. However, personal industry for upward mobility was an ethical principle for life conduct (Steinberg 1959), and ‘education’ or ‘learning’ was perceived as a means for such mobility, for their children if not themselves (Martin 1994). However, the structural and institutional context has drastically altered, which asks for reassessment of such worldviews. The structural shift from family-based agriculture toward a growing industrial and service economy has generated more industrial, service and professional workers, hence expanding the working and middle classes at the expense of the peasantry. This has resulted in high social mobility, wider social inequalities, and rising importance of formal qualifications for social and occupational status.

The youth labor market has seen an emergent stratification marked by increasing migrant labor workers and urban graduates, while the neoliberal value system of market competition, entrepreneurial individualism, and life-long human capital has increasingly penetrated into the education and labor market. But with the absence of a welfare state and strong life-course institutional framework, young people are subjected to not only precarious structural conditions but also weak and fragmented institutional guidelines (for example, the absence of established career paths and national skills competency standard). They also have to negotiate their life courses and construct meaningful expectations to orient their lives by relying heavily on personal and family resources.

**Conceptual framework – social structure and biographical expectations**

The conceptual aim of this paper is to understand how the structural, cultural and institutional features of a society impact upon young people’s subjective experiences, particularly in how biographical actions and expectations are appreciated and organized. The concepts of Bourdieu’s habitus and individualization are useful for this purpose.

Bourdieu views the social world as a relational space consisting of differentiated social positions occupied by individuals (Bourdieu 1980). These positions are determined primarily by the volume and composition of ‘capital’: economic, social or cultural (Bourdieu 1986). However, the values of these forms of capital are regulated by the structures and rules of the social fields, or particular domains of social lives, such as the cultural and economic fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Within the social space and its fields, individuals occupy relational positions by competing for the ‘right’ forms of capital. However, their action is neither mechanical nor entirely conscious, but follows a ‘practical sense’ (Bourdieu 1990:57). What appears ‘right’ or ‘reasonable’ in terms of strategies and possibilities is determined by the ‘habitus’ – “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu 1990:53). As both action-generating and
structured principles, the habitus links objective structural conditions with individual action through a set of dispositions, attitudes, system of values and worldviews. In this sense, the individuals’ biographical actions and orientations, or ‘practices’, are structured by the habitus, which is not only individual but also social, for it is a ‘product of history’ (Bourdieu 1990:54) realized through the internalization of external social conditions over time and thus shared by people in similar social positions.

However, Bourdieu’s conceptualization of such a system of dispositions and worldviews has been criticized for appearing reductionist and deterministic, and it offers little explanation of, and tends to take for granted, the institutional functioning at the meso-level (Jenkins 2002). His conceptualization assumes a relatively stable social space that has continually shaped the resources and system of values. For a volatile social space, with rapid structural changes, institutional redressing and renegotiated cultural norms, a complementing conceptual model is needed to explain the changing institutional requirements for constant reassessment of values and dispositions, as well as the individuals’ capacity for reorientation. The individualization thesis (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991) offers a complementing model of understanding biographical action and perspectives through changing structural conditions and institutional requirements, particularly in the context of dwindling power of traditional systems of values and orientations. The individualization thesis is sometimes inaptly understood in youth sociology as a shift from ‘standard biography’ to ‘choice biography’, rendering irrelevant social class background (Woodman 2009). The individualization model should however be understood as objective structural conditions and institutional compulsion (Zinn 2002), obliging individuals to become dependent on secondary institutions, the welfare state and market in particular. In the late modern societal context, therefore, the individuals are required to become self-reflexive and responsible for their own action, and are socially expected to make ‘choices’ and, in principal, become “the agents of their educational and market-oriented subsistence and the related life planning and organization” (Beck 1992:90) despite structural inequalities and forbidding practical difficulties (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991).

While the habitus is structured by past dispositions and upbringing experiences to allow individuals to negotiate the social space and tend to reproduce relational positions, the individualization model proposes that individualizing structural and institutional conditions since the late twentieth century have demanded people to re-orient themselves as agents and planners of their biographies. In a transitional society like Cambodia, where some aspects of individualization have gained ground through globalization and ‘compressed modernization’ (Chang 2010) while traditional framework remains significant, both models – focusing on reproduction and self re-orientation, respectively – offer a complementary framework for exploring how young Cambodians form biographical expectations.

Methods

This paper reports first results from thirty-two qualitative interviews with young people in Phnom Penh, the teeming capital of Cambodia, in 2011, as part of an ongoing project to examine youths’ experiences of the contemporary social transformation. The data were collected through in-depth qualitative interviewing, which requested the participants to discuss their biographical experiences, present life situations and future life perspectives and expectations. This open-ended approach to interviewing permits the opportunity for significant themes to emerge during the interview and analysis (Creswell 2007).
The study employs a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), apt for developing a conceptual typology (Creswell 2007), with two groups as a priori: young migrant labor workers and prospective university graduates, in keeping with the growing stratification of the youth labor market into labor migrants and urban graduate workers. This strategy is constructive in capturing “the social distribution of perspectives on the issue under study” (Flick 2002:188) among the growing working-class and middle-class workers. Theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was applied with both groups. Initial recruitment was made through recommendation from teaching staff at a local university and personal contacts at an industrial residential area, and subsequent participants were recruited through the same networks and snowballing. The first interviews in each group were conducted and analyzed for emergent themes and concepts, based on which the next interviews were identified to consolidate and test them empirically. Open coding and thematic coding procedure (Flick 2002) was first used to produce a thematic structure to code all the interview material and compare and contrast each case according to the thematic domains. The concepts resulting from open coding were related to each other to form categories that could group and contrast the available cases. The salient categories served as dimensions to characterize the constructed typology.

Patterns of biographical expectations in a transitional society

The variation in patterns of biographical expectations offers empirical evidence of how the institutional, cultural and structural contexts are subjectively experienced and appreciated by young Cambodians, potentially illustrating the interplay of action and structure in biographical constructions. The patterns of biographical expectations are constructed types (see Bailey 1973) based on the interviewees’ biographical experiences and future thoughts. If individuals are to connect their past, present and future in meaningful ways, they form a biographical ‘action logic’ (Zin 2002), which guides and gives meanings to their actions and hopefully leads to the expected or intended destinations. This also configures future perspectives involving goal orientation, temporal perception of biographical investment, and uncertainty.

Entrepreneurial Self

The first pattern of biographical expectation is an entrepreneurial self characterized by a self-actualizing biographical action logic. This logic emphasizes life-long development and personal aspiration for self-actualization, by which the individual is no longer bound to the traditionally strong sense of place in a given social order. This biographical logic reflects both the enterprise culture promoted by the neoliberal market and growing importance of cultural capital in the form of higher formal qualifications in contemporary Cambodia. The entrepreneurial self is thus the realization of the growing knowledge-based economy and expanding middle class. Therefore, this pattern of biographical expectation is limited to only some university students, who are equipped with the increasingly demanded cultural capital – both in embedded and certified forms – through their current education. An exemplary case below shows how the self-actualizing logic guides the biographical actions and expectations:

**Interviewer:** What is your plan after graduation?
**Davy:** After I graduate, my short-term plan is to try applying to be a lecturer at IFL… My short-term goal is to find out if this is the true purpose of life that I want to be a lecturer, or to work at an NGO or in diplomacy.

**Interviewer:** It means you’re still uncertain?
Davy: I can say not yet certain. I don’t have a clear goal yet, but I have a direction to go, which includes three things that I’ll try. I know my intention. I won’t shut out possibilities… First, since I’m doing a bachelor’s in education, I’ll apply to be a lecturer. Then I’ll work for an NGO. After working for 5 or 10 years and I can save some capital, I’ll set up my own business. I’ll run a business in education…

Interviewer: What if you don’t get what you want?
Davy: If I don’t get it, I’ll try more. Based on my experience … if I have the education, hard work and motivation, I probably can get it.” (female; 19 years old; studying English and international relations)

Davy receives unconditional material and cultural support from her parents. The financial costs for pursuing university education are covered by the parents, who provide no constraints on her study or occupational choices. As in other cases of the entrepreneurial self, her future goal orientation is focused on making a career or being open to exploring possibilities. Therefore, the entrepreneurial selves perceive their current education and expected further education as individual biographical investment for a long-term future, supplemented by part-time jobs for professional experience and network building, and by self-development experiences such as volunteering and community services. This type of biographical expectations also embraces future uncertainty in a competitive market manner, where risk-taking and exploration are required, and individualized strategies have to be taken to guard against ‘personal’ failures: making life-long investment in skills and attitude, remaining confident despite difficulties, and keeping long-term vision with varying levels of planning.

Table 1: Patterns of biographical expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>(1) Entrepreneurial Self</th>
<th>(2) Neo-traditional Self</th>
<th>(3) Non-expectant Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biographical action logic</td>
<td>Self-actualizing</td>
<td>Traditionalizing</td>
<td>Normalizing; rationalizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future goal orientation</td>
<td>Career-making; exploring</td>
<td>Upward mobility via traditionally normative mode, future livelihood stability</td>
<td>Remaining in upbringing milieu, future livelihood stability; Wishful; absent; misplaced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal range of biographical investment</td>
<td>Long-term future</td>
<td>Short-term future</td>
<td>Short-term future; Present (stabilizing, stopgap)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of future uncertainty</td>
<td>Space for exploration; personal risks</td>
<td>Possible threat to biography</td>
<td>Possible threat to biography; Fateful moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with occupational uncertainty</td>
<td>Life-long investment; remaining confident; keeping long-term vision (with or without planning)</td>
<td>Staying focused and trusting traditional norms</td>
<td>Staying focused and trusting traditional norms; Keeping hope; avoiding future thought; relying on luck</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neo-traditional Self

The second pattern of biographical expectations is a *neo-traditional self* that follows a traditionalizing mode of biographical action logic. In the traditional Cambodian worldview, personal industry for upward mobility is an ethical principle, but an individual is also imbued with a deep sense of pre-determined positions within a given social order as a result of the deeds from one’s past actions and lives. This traditional socio-cultural expectation contradictorily provides both a sense of inescapable identity and biography in a given social order and possibility for upward mobility within a traditionally normative framework. In the
contemporary context of volatile structural conditions and fragmented life-course institutional framework, such traditionalizing biographical action logic appears to be significant as it guides the biographical expectations of a majority of the young people interviewed.

The neo-traditional self is evident in both university students and labor migrants, and revealed in two modes: the mobility aspirant and the class-bound. In many cases, young people look forward to upward mobility through education. For example, Sokha, a 24-year-old male student, is supported by his peasant parents to move to stay with his aunt’s family in the city and, pursue higher education in electrical engineering and English. He explains why university study is being pursued:

There were neighbors who had encouraged their children to get high education. They [my parents] saw them get good education and some became doctors. Others … could work at the French Embassy and had a good salary. That’s why they encouraged me to study like others.

Some others, however, remain bound to the socio-cultural class of their parents and expected no higher socio-cultural identity. In many cases, some middle-class university students expect to get a stable ‘middle-class’ job, such as in accounting and ‘managerial’ or ‘professional’ occupations, and migrant laborers look forward to returning to their village to resume a peasant livelihood. For labor migrants, a typical biographical expectation is expressed by Ya, a 20-year-old garment worker:

Ya: In the future, I don’t want to work at a factory forever. I want to be a tailor.
Interviewer: Tailor?
Ya: Yes.
Interviewer: When will you be able to do that?
Ya: I’ve thought about it. Maybe I can save from my work and in one or two years.
Interviewer: So you’re taking any tailoring course?
Ya: No. I don’t have time… It’s a still a long way. I don’t have any plan, just a thought.
Interviewer: So you hope to have a tailoring business in Phnom Penh?
Ya: Maybe in a market in my hometown. There’s a market in my hometown…
[After some further questioning regarding the possibility of being a tailor]…
Ya: When I’m old, I have to do the farming because I’m originally a farmer.

In either scenario, the neo-traditional selves by and large expect a ‘stable’ and ‘improved’ livelihood, by perceiving their education or employment as a cultural or economic investment for a short-term future, for instance, after graduating and having a few years of job experience or saving ‘enough’ to return to the village. In addition, both groups appear, in the absence of strong formal institutional guidelines, to be ‘practical’ based on their past ‘habitus’ and the economic status of their families. By strongly relying on the traditional normative framework, future uncertainty inherent in the transitional societal conditions becomes possible threats to their biographies – rather than perceived as opportunity to advance or adapt as by the entrepreneurial selves, and the strategies to deal with such potential threats remain locked in their traditional habitus: staying focused and trusting traditional normative processes.

Non-expectant Self

The third pattern of biographical expectations is a non-expectant self among some migrant labor workers and a few students who are finding it difficult to form biographical expectations given the fluid structural and institutional conditions. The biographical action logic for this pattern is a normalizing or rationalizing one, by which one is occupied with trying to rationalize the present life conditions. For a few students, it appears to be caused by the failure to utilize the formal qualifications for attaining a meaningful work status and
having to return to more education or training. For some workers, the severe economic hardship or lack of familial spiritual ties appears to determine such a non-expectant pattern. A 23-year-old waitress provides an exemplary case:

**Interviewer:** Then what’s the permanent one?

**Touch:** The permanent one, I don’t know because I don’t know what to do yet. At home [village] there’s no job. And my family is poor. I don’t know what to do, and also I have only the mother, so there’s no farm land to work on.

With the preoccupation with rationalizing the present biography, the future does not feature significantly, making her goal orientation either wishful or absent altogether. The implication for the future thought is also that it is very uncertain and fateful, and to deal with it is to hope for the better, rely on luck, or avoid thinking about it.

The three patterns of biographical expectations are grounded in empirical material but also informed by the conceptual notions of individualization theorists and Bourdieu. For the entrepreneurial selves, the emergent institutional requirements of high formal qualifications and competitive market attitude for occupational success are reflected in their individualized mode of biographical constructions focusing on self-actualizing, flexibility and life-long endeavor. In contrast, the neo-traditional selves find themselves navigating the new structural and institutional conditions, but their biographical expectations are constructed through a sort of social habitus that has for generations provided a sense of identity and expectations in the Cambodian society despite over two decades of social upheavals. For the non-expectant selves, the altering structural and institutional conditions and the lack of family or personal resources to provide material and ontological security tend to induce apprehensive biographical constructions.

**Conclusion**

In a transitional society like contemporary Cambodia, the social space is volatile with rapidly transformed structural conditions and weak formal institutional framework. Also, traditional norms persist while cultural values are renegotiated amidst the penetration of individualized and market competition ethos. The biographical expectations examined above reflect these social dynamics in young people’s biographical constructions, while both reproducing and reorienting patterns are evident. It could be postulated, first of all, that a traditionally normative framework is crucial in permitting meaningful life orientations in a volatile social space. In addition, some young people supported by their family resources manage to construct a biographical orientation according to rules and attitudes demanded by the market-driven social transformation. Contrary to these ‘winners’ of rapid social change, some youths with little resources or that encounter failure are apprehensive about their biographical expectations. However, as the current social transformation remains a transitional process, the realization of their biographical expectations remains subject to the future structural and institutional contexts yet to transpire.

**References**


