Growing up in Cambodian Society: Stratification of Passages into Migrant Labor Workers and Urban Graduates

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Abstract

In a context of changing society, opportunity structure for transition into the labor market alters, but patterns and options of transition still depend on inequality structure. In this paper, I focus on young people’s place of growing up (rural versus urban) and family material resources as structuring features in the emergent stratification of passages into migrant labor workers and urban graduates. I use Cambodia’s transition into free market economy as a transforming social context, and draw on biographical experiences of Cambodian young people interviewed between 2011 and 2012 for a grounded theory study of their biographical construction. I show that in contemporary Cambodia, new opportunities in education and the labor market, have emerged, yet one’s place of growing up and family economic base matter significantly. Urban young people with better material resource base manage to become university graduates, while the rural poor find alternatives to traditionally subsistence-oriented agriculture in becoming migrant labor workers. This stratification of passages is tantamount to the expanding educated middle class and urban working class, illustrating the way in which patterns of inequality emerge anew.

Key words: Cambodia, opportunity structure, family resources, place, transition into work

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Introduction

A main concern in youth studies is the interconnection between social change and young people’s life course transitions and life chances. Despite initial eagerness in identifying increased agency and ‘choice biography’ (du Bois-Reymond 1998) in response to the late-modern process of individualization (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), there seems now to be a consensus that although ‘reflexivity’ has become a requisite in biographical construction, structural forces remain significant in shaping the passages young people undertake to reach work and family life. Processes of social change, such as the post-industrial labor market and increased educational opportunities, have altered the opportunity structure, but structural agents such as family, education, gender and ethnicity still determine the social, economic and cultural resources needed for success (Heinz 2009; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Roberts 2009). Therefore, inequality structure in a society may have transformed, but patterns and options of youth transitions remain embedded in resource inequalities. This paper focuses on the importance of place and family material resources as interlinked structural factors in shaping young people’s passages into work life in a context of profound transformation in the Cambodian society.

Since the country’s transition into market economy in the early 1990s, new opportunities have arisen due to sustained economic growth, continual social development, and expanding educational opportunities. At the same time, previously known life courses and status passages can no longer be taken for granted due to high levels of social mobility and volatility. Growing industrialization, service economy, and commercialized agriculture render less expectable a traditional peasant way of life based on subsistence-oriented farming. Increasing institutionalization and corporatization of economic enterprises and the labor
market make less certain chance of succeeding through folk skills and family-based, small-scale enterprises. The upward credentialing of the labor market and the abolition of state monopoly over higher education means higher educational qualifications no longer guarantee employment.

In this context, the paper examines how young people’s place of growing up (rural versus urban) and family economic status, which are intertwined, reproduce the inequality structure for social mobility through the emerging stratification of passages into the labor market as migrant labor workers and urban graduates, by drawing on biographical experiences of young people interviewed for an on-going project examining their life experiences. Rather than aimed at generalizing about patterns of youth transitions in contemporary Cambodia, this stratification is described as significant emergence, whereby place and family material resources play apparent roles.

The context – Free market transition and transformed labor market

Cambodia was traditionally a peasant society, where the vast majority of the population made their living on subsistence-oriented farming, and the post-independence national prosperity in the 1950s–60s generated a normative framework for legitimate social mobility through formal education and subsequent employment in the civil service. Two decades of warfare, organized violence and socialist state suppression in the 1970s–80s made such framework unrealistic, but it remained idealized.

The country’s free market transition in the early 1990s has brought about sweeping changes. Economic growth has been ‘impressive’ (Davies 2010) with profound structural shift. Agricultural economy has shrunk, dropping from 48% to 29% in GDP share and from 79% to 56% in employment share between 1993 and 2007 (WB 2009), while commercialized farming has become a growing trend (Ovesen et al. 2012). During the same period, the
industrial sector grew from 13% to 30% in GDP share and 4% to 15% in employment share, while service sector employment rose from 18% to 29% (WB 2009). Living standards, social mobility and educational opportunities have risen, but so have inequalities, which most apparent in contrast between the burgeoning urban centers and the flagging economy and poverty of the rural areas (Slocomb 2010).

The opportunity structure has also transformed for the transition into the contemporary labor market. New opportunities for employment have opened up for a new generation of youths. However, only the resourceful are able to access attractive employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, and youths with few resources have to contend with new ‘opportunities’ of low-paid, labor-intensive industries and services. The rest of the paper will illustrate how young people’s place of growing up and family economic base differentiate their early life courses into becoming migrant labor workers and urban graduates.

**Place of growing up, family resources, and stratified passages into the labor market**

Economic and labor market conditions have impact on individual life courses because they produce and manage forms of inequality by distributing resources and life chances as well as by influencing subjective perception of life course possibilities (Swader 2009). In this paper, I use the stratification of youth labor market into migrant labor workers and university graduates to trace the conditioning of young Cambodians’ life courses with particular attention of the role of place of growing up and family economic resources.

To illustrate this, I use extracts of biographical experiences drawn from a study on young people’s biographical management in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital city. The study compares the life experiences and expectations of two groups of young people: migrant laborers (n=20; 13 male and 7 female) and university students (n=31; 16 male and 15 female). Theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was applied with both groups in
order to first discover significant life experiences and issues and then narrow in on selected ones, and two waves of biographically oriented, qualitative interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2012) were conducted from July to November 2011 (n=32) and August to October (n=19).

The extracts are not used as representative cases, but to best provide supporting examples of how the stratified passages are significantly shaped by place and family economic status through two main groups: the ‘privileged urban’ and ‘rural poor’, with ‘privileged’ referring a relative situation of having access to resources to continue education and delay the transition into employment. There are indeed a few cases that could be described as the ‘urban poor’ and ‘privileged rural’ and not discussed within the scope of this paper.

Growing up urban privileged into urban graduates

The labor market has seen increasing numbers of university graduates over the last decade, due to the upward credentialing of the labor market and rising educational opportunities. Demands for graduates to work for non-governmental organizations, the civil service, and foreign- and locally-invested firms have significantly expanded since the country’s free market transition in the early 1990s. The education system has improved, and enrollments at all levels dramatically increased (WB 2013). With growing demands for higher qualified ‘human capital’ and supplies of secondary school leavers, the state privatized higher education in 1997, following the abolition of higher education-for-state employment arrangement in the early 1990s. Higher education has dramatically expanded, with a twenty-fold increase of enrollments between 1997 and 2010 (MoEYS 2011). This has widened the route toward becoming urban graduates and hence educated middle-class workers, although the likelihood of succeeding through this route remains largely limited to those growing up in urban areas and with significant family material resources.
Gaps are wide between rural and urban areas in all aspects of education, including enrollment rates, teacher-student ratios, passing rates, resources and infrastructure (ODI 2011; UNESCO 2010). For example, high school attendance rates in Phnom Penh and urban areas (52% and 54%, respectively) are much higher than that in rural areas (25%), with high school completion rates even more disparate (53% in urban areas versus 21% in rural areas) (MoEYS 2012). The parents and young people growing up in urban areas are also in an advantaged position to be aware of the changes and expectations of the transforming labor market, especially job prospects and nature of upward credentialing, because higher educational institutions, prospective employers, job and study fairs, exposure to media and information and communication technologies, and opportunities for experience building through voluntary or part-time work are concentrated in urban areas, especially Phnom Penh. Urban children usually have extra lessons from primary through high school, while taking private language lessons (usually English and sometimes Chinese and French) is a norm, and continuing to higher education has become expectable for those with material resources. Higher education is also stratified for training quality, with higher fees tending to warrant better educational experience, and doing two concurrent degrees at the same time (often combing a ‘specialized’ degree with English degree) has become a common strategy to enhance job prospect. This means that family material resources become a significant basis for ensuring success into the educated middle class. Within this passage, gender has become rather insignificant as the urban high school attendance rate among females has equaled that of males in the last few years, and female participation in higher education reached 40% in 2010 (MoEYS 2011).

Two exemplary cases explain why this passage through higher education is taken, which illustrates the significant role of family material resources and work life perception based on urban growing-up:
**Interviewer:** Why did you decide to go to university?

**Lyda:** Decided to study at university? … Well, for my family, education is important. So when I finished high school, I just had to go to university… Also, it’s because of my parents… Financially, they could support me to study, so studying was the only option… Going to university was a must. *(Female, 20)*

**Interviewer:** Why did you go on to university?

**Ratana:** If you only finished high school, who would employ you? Even university graduates now may not have a job! And if we don’t have a university degree, no one would give us a job anywhere. *(Male, 19)*

For these two young people, university education is a must essentially because laboring jobs are not within their perspective and material support for the university passage is either guaranteed or taken for granted. Like all other cases of university students growing up in urban areas in the study, their job prospects range from technical to managerial and professional workers in the private, state or non-governmental sectors. Their reasoning and biographical route reflect an urban middle-class habitus, whereby higher education has become the only means to stake claim for an educated middle-class position in the transformed labor market and social space.

**Growing up rural poor into migrant labor workers**

Growing up in the countryside is a disadvantage with regard to opportunity structure, especially in education. Schools in the countryside are poorly resourced and staffed, and going to school involves long distance of travel and juggling acts between learning and helping with domestic and family productive tasks, especially farming. Coupled with a high level of poverty in the countryside (over 90% of the country’s poor are in the countryside [MoP 2010]), completing high school is a remote possibility for most rural youths. In addition, completing high school does not have much instrumental value since it neither improves occupational prospect nor warrants higher educational entry, for vocational orientation is absent from high school curricula and university education too costly for the rural poor. As a result, just 25% of rural youths attend high school, and only 21% of them
stay on till completion (MoEYS 2012). These experiences are common among the young people growing up in rural areas interviewed for the study.

What are then the options for most of the poor, rural youths, who find themselves in a shrinking traditionally subsistence-oriented farming and flagging rural economy? A recent nationally representative survey estimates that 22% of rural households across Cambodia have their family members aged 15 and over migrate beyond their home districts in the last five years (MoP 2012). Of these migrants, almost 80% are aged between 15 and 30, and 57% and 30% move – primarily for work – to urban areas and other countries, respectively. The Capital of Phnom Penh is the largest destination, absorbing half of all the rural migrants, of which 85% move to find work (MoP 2012). For poor, rural young people, therefore, migrating to work in neighboring countries or urban centers, especially Phnom Penh, is a major option to earn money. For instance, among the 350,000 garment manufacturing workers, mostly based in urban centers, 80% are young women from the countryside (Arnold and Toh 2010). In addition to a large informal economy, the burgeoning construction and service industries of urban centers also attract rural youths with hundreds of thousands of low- or non-skilled jobs (CDRI 2007). These young migrant laborers most of time have to rely on their kin and rural network to access jobs and living security, resulting in distinct residential neighborhoods of migrant workers in urban centers, characterized by poor housing and public services. Migrant laboring work is also characterized by gender segregation, whereby males are concentrated in construction, transportation and manual labor, and females in garment manufacturing, domestic work and entertainment (see also, CDRI 2007; Derks 2008; MoP 2012).

Two cases of how and why poor, rural young people migrated to work in Phnom Penh exemplify the biographical passage into migrant laboring work:

**Pha:** When I quit school, I helped with my family's livelihood. I helped mom and dad on the rice farm. I quit school because my dad was ill, so I had to quit and help with the farming. When I saw others coming to Phnom Penh, I also wanted to come... My parents didn't stop me because
there were many others from the same village who had come. Since I already quit school, mom allowed me to come here three years ago because even if I had stayed back, there would have been nothing to do. Also, we were all daughters at home, so we had to come to work and help support the family. (Factory worker, female, 20)

Ty: When I was small, I really wanted to come. Then my uncle asked, “You want to come along? I’ll bring you!” Oh! I was jumping with joy! I came to Phnom Penh with just two sets of clothes.

Interviewer: Why did you want to come?
Ty: I saw others were happy coming to Phnom Penh, and I wanted to. I saw people visiting the village during holidays and they had money to spend and nice clothes. I had only one set of clothes but they would have more… nice ones. Here [in Phnom Penh] I have proper clothes and there I had just one set and had to wash them with water from a well. But here there’s tap water, you know, and I can wash my clothes with as much water as I want. (Factory worker, male, 19)

The two cases may appear different in the motivation to migrate. However, what is common in these as well as most other cases of young migrant laborers is that the only ‘practical’ option for them to earn – either to contribute to the household economy or to gain financial independence – is to find work in urban centers. Also, the types of work accessible and anticipated are labor-intensive and low-paid, while jobs not involving manual labor are practically beyond their realm of perceived possibilities, as one female worker puts it, “There’s no chance!”

There are indeed a few exceptional cases in the study, where poor, rural youths manage to continue to university. However, these few agentic individuals still require a minimum level of family material resources to support the living and study costs. This minimum basis includes the fact that parents and relatives in the village can afford to sell off assets to support them without endangering their household livelihood, or that relatives in the city could provide accommodation and/or other types of support.

Conclusion

In the Cambodian context of transition into a free market economy, new opportunities – particularly in education and the labor market – have emerged. However, these opportunities are differentially distributed based on structural features, particularly family resources and place of growing up. Urban young people with better material resource base
manage to proceed into university and become urban graduates, while the rural poor find alternatives to traditionally subsistence-oriented agriculture in migrating to perform labor work. This stratification of passages is tantamount to the expanding educated middle class and urban working class, illustrating the way in which patterns of inequality emerge anew.

The structuring effects of place and family resources presented above resonates with the emerging consensus in youth sociology that young people’s life chances remain shaped by structural factors despite increased reflexivity and ‘choice’ (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). However, the patterns of change and negotiation here do not necessarily conform to the Eurocentric framework of late modernity and individualization, recently dominant in youth sociology, where risk and uncertainty become principle features in biographical construction. Risk and uncertainty are inherent in processes of change, or even more pronounced in a context of rapid transformation like Cambodia, but historical specificities, including the absence of a welfare state, strong family values and a history of violent social upheavals, may allow individuals to contemplate opportunities along with, if not more than, risk and uncertainty. An interesting example is that gender gaps appear to be narrowing in the context of the transition into work life and social mobility in certain respects as urban young women are catching up with men in higher education while rural young women are increasingly on the move beyond traditional domestic confinement.

References


