


rural Cambodian girls/women to that of poor, urban Blacks girls/women in the United States. In particular, the study compares women under 35 who were born into environments impacted by social upheaval: in Cambodia, the Vietnam occupation, and the subsequent United Nations presence in the 1990s following the Khmer Rouge genocide, and in the United States, the crack cocaine epidemic, which afflicted poor, urban Black communities.

Participants
Six Cambodian women and six Black U.S. women, who grew up during times of extreme social disruption, and who completed secondary education and went on to tertiary education were the participants. The Cambodian women were from impoverished rural areas. Three were born in the late 1970’s/early 1980’s, and three were born in the late 1990’s. Their narratives reflect the social context of those decades, in that those born in the late 1970’s responded to conditions of extreme social disorganization. For those born later, both more education system infrastructure existed as well as more employment opportunities in foreign-owned factories, domestic service abroad, and sex-related work in Cambodia and overseas, although the nation was still recovering from the trauma of the Khmer Rouge genocide. In order to match Cambodian and Black American participants as regards age cohort and proximity in time to severe social disruption, we will focus on the earlier Cambodian cohort.

The Black women were also from impoverished areas, specifically, inner cities East St. Louis and Cairo Illinois and the suburbs of Chicago. One was born in the late 1970’s and the others in the early 1980’s, a period when American inner cities were plagued by a crack cocaine epidemic, accompanied by high crime rates, mostly based on murder, drugs and gang violence.

The researchers
The researchers who gathered the data were members of the same demographic as their participants and thus were “insider researchers”. Stories told from the inside out are particularly valuable for groups, who are often represented in both the academic literature and by the media as either statistics or problems. Interviewers introduced the study to the participants by noting the small number of women from the participants’ demographic who completed their tertiary education. They then asked them to tell their life stories in terms of their own experiences and strengths of young women in challenging contexts to inform parents, communities, and institutions that can support them to continue their schooling.

Data analysis and trustworthiness
This study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of polyphony and dialogue. Polyphony refers to the incorporation of many voices, references, and assumptions that are not a narrator’s own, but which she may weave into her life story. Each voice carries a moral-political force. The idea of dialogism suggests that the narrator is in dialogue with these voices as she narrates her life (Bakhtin, 1930; 1984; 1986). The paper is also grounded in narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986) which sees humans as making meaning of our lives through stories rather than logic, from this standpoint, even rational ideas for one’s life are seen as part of a larger narrative that involves the other meaningful relationships.

Data were first coded narrative-by-narrative for each group in order to better understand how the women managed to stay in school and to identify the challenges they encountered. We defined narrative, for the purpose of analysis and in keeping with Bakhtin, as an utterance carrying a "should" message. However, unlike Bakhtin's theory that all utterances carry a moral/political message, "should" utterances for most of these women also incorporated a message about the need to survive. We then sought particularly strong narratives within each of the two groups. We also looked in the data for reference to, either directly or obliquely, of historically contextualized political, economic, and social influences on the women’s lives. Other scholars have identified all of the narratives we identified in the women’s stories as represented in analyses or observation of mainstream Cambodian culture or mainstream African American culture. This contributes to the confirmability of our study. The “insider” positionality of two of the researchers contributes to the credibility of our research.

Significance
The data from the Cambodian part of this study has been developed into a narrative book and distributed to lower secondary school girls in rural areas, the demographic most likely to leave school. The production of the books was funded by Maryknoll Cambodia and distributed to girls in rural schools and communities by the UN Fast Track Initiative, UNICEF, World Education, the U.S. Peace Corps, and individual Cambodians who have returned to their home communities in rural areas to conduct workshops with youth. The intent is to replicate this distribution project in a contextually appropriate way with the data from the U.S. part of the study. Both studies together provide a counter narrative to the negative ones that persist for many young women who come from impoverished communities. They depict a more nuanced view of the persistence and strengths of young women in challenging contexts to inform parents, communities, and institutions that can support them to continue their schooling.
They offer stories of resilience and survival that can speak to many and perhaps help to increase the representation and attrition rates of these women in tertiary education. The stories begin the process of developing a public narrative out of personal struggles and triumphs.

**Cambodian Women’s Narratives**

We identified three strong narratives in the educational life histories of the early cohort of Khmer women. In this section, we will present the general narratives and words from the girls’ specific stories to contextualize the narratives.

**Girls should earn money to help their parents and siblings.** This narrative was at times voiced by the girls themselves, their parents, and their neighbors, although not consistently. For example, Saret (born 1979) described her neighbors’ advice to her parents.

Interviewer: *Did anyone, like neighbors or relatives, discourage you from studying?*

Saret: Yes, especially my neighbors. I failed the Grade 8 exit exam once. At that time, I was big enough to work, and a lot of garment factories were opening around my house. Most of the children in my village, both boys and girls, around my age went into factory work. Only a few children from rich families, my elder cousin, and I were still studying. My elder cousin and I had the same living condition. Her father was a laborer, too. My neighbors asked my parents why they let me stay in school, since we could now find jobs. They told my parents they should tell me to drop out of school and work instead.

But, Saret’s parents were ambivalent:

*My parents never considered it because I was able to earn my own money to go to school. They thought that if they didn’t have anything to give me, as long as I studied hard, they could help me to get knowledge. They never listened to others’ words.*

But when I failed the Grade 8 exam, my mom and dad decided I should quit school, first, because I had failed the exam, and second, because at that time, my elder cousin was working at a Chinese factory. The factory wanted those they hired to have a Grade-8 education to do non-labor work, and they provided three months of training in Vietnam. They paid about $120 a month. Laborers got only $20 a month. Compared to other jobs, it’s a lot of money, and so Dad pointed out to me that I would get three months of paid training in Vietnam. All of that was before I even started working. My parents thought that would be a good choice for me.

**Education is the path out of poverty.** This narrative was voiced counter to the previous one. It was either uttered or modeled by teachers; parents, siblings, and relatives; peers; NGOs; and the girls themselves. Each of these “speakers”, except for the NGOs, at different times voiced both this narrative and drop out of school to “support your family” narrative.

Again, Saret explains what the narrative means to her:

*Think about it: an old person carrying big grain bags is not easy. Sometimes, in the evening when Dad came home, he had calf strain and arm strain, so hard that he couldn’t walk. So miserable. This is the state I remember and will never forget. That’s why we must study hard, so that in the future we can take care of ourselves. Our life won’t be as hard as theirs...Laborers who work too hard will get internal injuries. That’s why I say that no matter what, whatever we can do to try hard, we should try. Time is valuable for us. And we must find the time to study. Everyone is busy, so we must find the time. Studying doesn’t require you to stop working. We can keep working. But whenever we have any free time, we must study. We must not waste our time and be idle and useless.*

Sophea (born 1981), who lived her first ten years in a refugee camp, stayed with relatives in the countryside and was determined to stay in school. She compares the life she wanted to what she saw around her:

*I kept thinking what I wanted to do. I wanted to work for a company. So I kept on trying to study. I had learned from the experience of being surrounding others who had very little education. They farmed and gardened, made snacks to sell, and found clams to sell their whole life long. I didn’t want to have a repetitive life like theirs.*

*I must try hard myself. The Khmer girls “answered” these narratives with one of resilience and perseverance. This narrative was also, at times, voiced by a parent, usually a mother and accompanied with a warning to “not end up with a life like mine.”*
Black Women’s Narratives

Three strong narratives characterized the Black women’s stories. In this section, we will draw on the women’s interviews to illustrate what these narratives meant to them.

**Finish school and don’t end up in the predicaments in which your mothers found themselves.** Historically, Black women have had experiences in the United States that distinguish their lives from those of other races. They are also affected by both gender and race issues. Dominant paradigms and societal hierarchies of gender and race can harshly impact the lives of Black women (hooks, 1984), including in the realm of education (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

For the Black women interviewed for this study, education was seen as a way out of the hood (neighborhood, Projects, Inner City) lifestyle. The voices of family, friends and mentors of the Black women saying that education is way out were part of the women’s stories.

Images of the lives around her provided Alicia (born 1982) with the motivation to get out.

*I continued in school because I didn’t have any other choice, there was no plan B in my mind. I looked around me, looked at my grandparent’s house and looked at my community and thought this can’t be life. I finished high school so I wouldn’t be a statistic, and I went to college, grad school and professional school so that I could maintain that status…it’s a cold world, but you can’t lose yourself in it.*

Because you are Black, it will be harder for you to ‘make it’. This dominant narrative in the women’s stories reflects the high level of intersectionality, which Black women endure. Intersectionality is the interweaving of several stressors and factors, which must be faced on a daily basis (hooks, 1994). The counter narrative to this is because I’m Black, I will prove to you that I will make it.

Kelly (born 1982) described her satisfaction at proving the dominant narrative wrong.

*I always felt a high level of racism in my classes, I really couldn’t put my hand on it, but it was there. There were white people who thought they were the smartest and best in the program, and um you know, I made like a 15 on my ACT and a low score on my GRE. I never thought I was the smartest, but they thought they were sometimes. I felt they thought maybe I would not get a job or something, but funny thing is that I was the first person in the program that got accepted in the residency after only applying to ummmm two, I was the first that got selected. I was number one, and I was the first that got picked for one of the top programs in the country, and ummm the other Black girl - I don’t know if this is coincidence or what (laughs) - but she was the second person in our program to get picked for a residency, at one of the top in the country, and I got picked for the other one.*

The women themselves were not the only ones to voice this narrative of “I will..."
make it”. The voices of their mothers and grandmothers were also present in their stories, often telling of sacrifices they made to survive.

Denise (born 1979), for example, tells of her mother’s efforts to support her daughter’s schooling.

My 8th grade year, I begged my mom, “Can we move?” So 8th grade year I said, “Okay, I do not want to go back to the school I previously went to.” So I went to a small Catholic school. I wasn’t even Catholic. But it was not the Roman Catholicism. That was contained to religion class, and it was a good experience. But I’m sure it did break my mother’s pockets. Tuition made it where my mother did not have money to save up for our own place. So, I took time to learn as much as I could there.

However, the pressures of drugs, crime, and violence in their communities were in tension with the image of women sacrificing to help their daughters. At times, social disruption became part of the girls’ home lives. One of the women describes being kept out of school.

At the age of 12, I was denied my legal right to receive an education. While most children were at school, I was at home babysitting my siblings. My mother promised us home schooling. Unfortunately, that vow was never met. I was home bound for three years. She said that we were homeschooled, maybe in her mind she thought that, but no. My mother’s not allowing us to attend school often reminds me of Pip’s sister in the novel Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. Since we feared my mom, we were too afraid to speak against this neglect. Oftentimes, due to domestic disputes, police would come to our home.

She later describes what her neighborhood was like:

I remember that I saw a dead man laying in a parking lot once. My grandfather and I were at a local grocery and right across from it was this man someone had rolled up on him in a truck and shot him. He was left uncovered on that street for hours. We stood and watched, talked to people, tried to figure out what happened. Eventually, going home around the corner, like it was nothing.

This life was not foreign to me. I would go on to have friends have husbands murdered because of what that man laying in the streets was murdered for. One of my friends had a husband killed in a car accident and her boyfriend murdered by a saved off shotgun. In some ways, moving from the abuse I had at home with my mother to East St. Louis was just another picture that violence surrounded me. My mom was from East St. Louis, and she called it “the jungle”. Today it is number one for murders, and four hours from that, Chicago is the same thing when it comes to large cities.

Later, her grandmother told her to not come home to their community after she earned her Ph.D.

Contributing to the disruption in these women’s lives was the absence of their fathers. Even when their fathers were there, as in the cases of two of the women, it was not their fathers they described sacrificing for them, but their mothers. Single motherhood or the absence of the father has been an important factor in Black women’s strong independence. Schilling (2008) concludes that independence is one of the contributors to Black women’s resilience.

An important narrative supporting these women’s determination to “make it” is, in Melody’s (born 1984) words, God is the guiding source of my strength. She explains,

My faith helped me, I cannot function outside of God, and whenever I walk outside that narrow path all is chaotic. I cannot function. My dad is a man of faith, and he has always told his kids the knowledge of God. We grew up in church, but never understood why we were going to church. We were never taught to spend time with him. When I was 16 I felt the presence of God, at COGIC church. I spent more time with God. I was reestablished at 21. God has been the guiding source of my strength.

Historically, Black Americans have been a people of soul and due to oppressive situations ranging back to slavery, cite God as their ultimate source (Dillard, 2006; Milner, 2009).

These Black American women’s stories of staying in school contained strong narratives of resilience in the face of a dominant national narrative that casts Black Americans as deficient. These women spoke back to this dominant narrative, and their stories contained the voices of people in their lives, who also “spoke back”. However, these voices were not consistent and voiced both narratives of the importance of staying in school and actions that placed school second to coping with the stresses of social and family disruption.

**Shared Narratives**

The premise of comparing such widely divergent educational experiences is that the groups being compared were of the same gender, age cohort, grew up in a context of extreme social disruption, and persevered through primary and secondary school and on to a tertiary education, when the odds of success were against them. Our intent was to see in what ways the women in each of these two groups are similar.

An important point made by this study is that nations, both rich and poor, have populations of women, who due to poverty and social disruption find it difficult to stay in school. Both the Cambodians and the Black Americans voiced a narrative of education being a way out. The women in this study voiced their own narrative and that of their family, friends and relatives that one should stay in school in order to get out of poverty. For the Cambodians, the motivation was to escape lives of endless toil; for the Black Americans, education was a way out the “hood.” Additionally, the women in both groups included in their stories the
voices of teachers recognizing the girls’ struggles and affirming them, either through their words or their actions.

Women in both groups told stories of persevering to remain in school, even in the face of discouragement. The resilience of the Black American women was buoyed by their faith in God. The Cambodian women “kept trying”. We interpret their narrative as being consistent with the Theravada Buddhist belief that each of us is responsible for our own liberation.

Diverging Narratives

At the most fundamental level, the narratives of staying in school to get out of poverty and the determination to stay in school in spite of pressures to drop out could be heard in the stories from both groups of women. And although the women grew up in different spiritual traditions, the teachings of those traditions could be heard in their narratives, and in fact, were a central source for their strength. Similarly, their social contexts were both characterized by extreme social disruption.

However, the two groups were positioned differently within their larger societies. The Cambodian women were all members of the Khmer majority in their country. They were, indeed, poor. But almost everybody in the country was poor at the time. While Cambodia, as a whole, has struggled to come to terms with perpetrating their own genocide and finding a way to live together in communities as former perpetrators and victims, their ethnicity or race did not define their role in the genocide. Social class did, with intellectuals, artists, and members of the government service being the primary target of the genocide. Nevertheless, Cambodians generally take pride in their long history, art, and culture.

The Black Americans, on the other hand, constituted a racial minority within a White majority national population. The Crack Epidemic overwhelmingly affected Black urban communities in the U.S. Most Black Americans were brought to the U.S. against their will as slaves. Dubois (1994) writes of the Black experience in the U.S. as characterized by a double-consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Illustrating this, Alicia told her interviewer, “My grandmother told me on several occasions not to tell people where I was from. I recall when I started dating in college, she would warn me, ‘Don’t tell them you are from here. Get far, far away. This is a horrible place.’” Thus, while Alicia’s and other women’s resilience came from their identification with their ethnic environment and communities, they also held a shame that had been passed down from their relatives. The shame seemed to mirror the voice of media commentary on the people of urban inner cities being dark, nihilistic and unmotivated.

Reflections and Implications

We have not attempted to compare the educational life stories of women in the way we have done here without doubts about the wisdom of our venture. Stories and words can potentially provide deep insights into the meanings people bring to their lives. But such stories resist generalization. The attempt to say one life is like another must necessarily force us to overlook the details and peculiarities of the two lives and their contexts, a folly since no two lives are alike. A critical look will always turn up one more contextual variation to render such comparisons dubious.

Nevertheless, the narrative that education is a path out of poverty was alive and well in both groups of women. So was the personal narrative of determination and persistence, which each of the women expressed. This would seem to be a hopeful finding for all of us who care about women and education. However, a hint of the impending scarcity of employment opportunities for those who have completed university degrees was evident in two of the Cambodian women’s stories collected in 2010. As poorer nations often experience the world’s economic problems sooner and more severely than richer ones, by 2012, unemployment of the educated classes had spread to wealthier nations, including the U.S. and Western Europe.

Does this mean we should question of the value of a university education? While we might question whether or not women such as the ones in this study benefitted from education questioning the value of such an education for those who haven’t. We must take care as we take advantage of opportunities for ourselves not to “pull of the ladder behind us”, as Michelle Obama so eloquently said.

References


Informal Learning of managers in a multinational company in Germany, Great Britain and Spain: an Intercultural Comparison

The paper focuses on managers’ informal learning within the context of their company’s learning culture. It asks: How do managers learn informally in the context of different learning cultures? In different European countries, what are the differences and similarities in informal learning between three companies? The paper first identifies a terminological basis for informal learning, with special reference to the German debate. Thereafter it outlines the comparative design for the study. Using the category resources for informal learning, the paper then gives an insight into the research study. The study results are presented in three steps: a descriptive and analytical juxtaposition, a descriptive comparison, and an analytical comparison. The analytical comparison gives an idea of the reasons for the differences. Finally, the interpretation of the comparison is discussed critically.

1. Informal learning

1.1 Discussion on informal learning

In the German discussion, informal learning was long characterized by what it was not, i.e. unplanned, unorganised, or subconscious. Schöpfthaler (1981) coined the term ‘residual category’ for informal learning. Dohmen (1999, p 25) defines informal learning as ‘…unplanned and non institutionalised learning in all aspects of life…’ and as a ‘…natural type of human learning…’5. He formulates the main characteristics of informal learning as, ‘…immediate in everyday life…’, ‘…determined by a reason – incidental – sporadic…’, as well as ‘…holistic – problem oriented…’. This understanding of informal learning limits the awareness of informal learning. The terminology for empirical research is missing. Informal learning that happens in organised or institutionalised education is likely to be excluded from the empirical research.

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4 Parts of this paper are based on an already published papers in the Journal Andragogical Studies (Egetenmeyer 2011)

5 Translated by R.E., original: nicht planmäßig organisiertes und nicht institutionalisiertes Lernen im Lebensvollzug, natürliches Grundform menschlichen Lebens (Dohmen 1999, p 25)