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Affect as narrative action in the Global South: An analysis of small stories about transnational same-sex relationships in Cambodia

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This paper focuses on the performance of small stories from two Cambodian men interviewed by the researcher about the relationships they form with men from the Global North. The analysis attends to the empirical significance of these performances by focusing on the mobilization of affect as an interactional linguistic and narrative resource that foregrounds social action in this context. In this way, these small stories reveal how these men may challenge and reshape dominant social discourses at this sexualised North/South interface. Bringing to the field of narrative inquiry approaches from queer linguistics, and Southern perspectives, this paper is therefore tasked with exploring what the field may potentially gain from these areas, especially regarding the theoretical and methodological possibilities of a North/South dialogue in the production of knowledge.

Keywords: Cambodia, transnational same-sex relationships, affect, practices, queer linguistics, Southern perspectives, North/South intersections, small stories, narrative analysis, discourse analysis

Introduction

The allure of Cambodia with its ancient temple ruins, rich culture and promise of adventure, has firmly established the country as a popular destination on the South East Asian tourist trail. As such, the spaces in which globally and economically mobile visitors come into contact with the locals who serve and befriend them constitute one of the many disparate intersections of the Global North and South. In this paper, grounded in perspectives gained through ethnographic methods in this context, I explore discursive features of an affective social practice facilitated within the sexualised social spaces of a major Cambodian tourist city (i.e. the commercial venues advertised as catering for an international “gay” clientele). In doing so, I focus on the small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) of two English speaking Cambodian men who were interviewed for this research project about their relationships with the male visitors from the Global North they are able to meet in these spaces.

Besides the broader research narrative that highlights the significance of these same-sex transnational relationships to the spatio-temporal context in which they are initiated and sustained, the analysis draws attention to how narrative research and analysis of small stories may align with approaches from queer linguistics and an ex-centric Southern vantage point (Milani & Lazar, 2017). Moreover, consistent with recent discourse analytic work that has provided understandings of affect as social action, as discussed for example in the context of the research interview (Prior, 2016), in linguistic landscapes of the body (Peck & Stroud, 2015), in acts of citizenship (Milani, 2015), and the interrelations between economies and emotions (Katigbak, 2015), this analysis brings further awareness to the field of narrative inquiry of affect as a powerful interactional narrative resource. Bringing together these perspectives, this

paper therefore presents an account of how the performance of these small stories may challenge normative assumptions and find saliency as discursive performances of agentic and transformative action (Lawless, 2001) at this sexualised North/South interstice.

Queer linguistics and “seeing from the South”

I begin with an overview of the theoretical and methodological approaches that have informed this narrative study. Queer linguistics has recently gained momentum as a means of connecting language-based discourse analysis and queer theory (Leap, 2011; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). As in queer theory, queer linguistics uses aspects of gender and sexuality as the initial point of inquiry with the aim of deconstructing and reconceptualising through critical reflection, pervasive regimes and forms of normativity. These regimes are seen as being discursively constructed through gendered and sexualised social categories and practices, although not exclusively. Because of this focus, queer studies are often misleadingly conflated with gay and lesbian studies. However, gay and lesbian studies tend to maintain their foci on notions of identity, whereas a queer approach to language and discourse is to “articulate the problems and leakages of identity categories” (Yep, 2003, p. 39). In other words, a queer perspective, grounded in poststructuralist theory, works towards a practice of knowledge production by questioning and problematizing rather than essentialising the identities and practices made relevant by social actors in their individual contexts. Therefore, rather than assuming a universal “gay” identity, especially in the context of this study where the symbols and practices of an imagined global gay culture and community permeate many of the commercial spaces of

this Cambodian city, it has been more productive to examine how these identifications may be mediated through local understandings of same-sex transnational desires (Jackson, 2001).

In this respect, queer linguistics is not solely tasked with the analysis of discourses of gender and sexuality, but sets out to explore the intersections between these and other global/local systems of power and identity centred on factors such as ethnicity, social class (Levon, 2015; Milani & Lazar, 2017), and, in the case of this practice, access to and mastery of multilingual resources. Adopting a queer linguistic perspective to investigate the discursive construction of social action in this setting thus means to problematize sexualised notions of North to South knowledge flows, neo-colonial forms of exploitation and conversely empowerment, as well as abiding hetero and homonormative discourses that often subsume practices situated in the Global South. To this end, rather than a study of “gay” Cambodian men, I aim to investigate what forms of *queer action* might be taking place in this Southern context.

The analytical focus afforded by queer linguistics therefore aligns in this study with a research approach that is positioned from a Southern perspective. Although this inquiry is situated in Cambodia, a geographic region of the Global South, and focuses on the knowledges of social actors there, taking such a position is not to privilege, at risk of essentialising, or even exoticising, one form of knowledge production over another. In contrast, and as explained by Milani and Lazar (2017), it is to:

...use the South as a conceptual and analytical lens through which to understand the discursive dynamics of gender and sexuality in non-Northern contexts, and, in doing so, strive towards more inclusive transnational theoretical projects (p. 311).

This point is made with the understanding that the locales and inhabitants of the Global South are not in some way external to the Global North, but are set in a complex state of interdependency with the North, maintained through social, cultural, and economic systems and flows. The task therefore in “seeing from the South” is to hold forms of knowledge and assumptions emanating and applied from the centre up to scrutiny through locally sensitive ways of understanding (Milani & Lazar, 2017), and to go some way towards achieving what Lazar (2017, p. 422) refers to as the “decolonisation of knowledge”. Just as queer linguistic inquiry brings into question normativities from a Northern theoretical context, a Southern perspective furthers this line of inquiry by providing an entry point through which to critically examine dominant, and by extension normative, social discourses, both global and local. Dominant discourses (or master narratives) have been defined as an interconnected system of ideologies, structures, and practices circulating in societies (Van De Mieroop & Clifton, 2016) through which selves and actions are produced and interpreted. However, this also means that dominant discourses can only be recognised, in acts of narration for example, as “*in situ* discursive constructions” (Van De Mieroop & Clifton, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, taking into account recipient design and other contextual resources and constraints, a narrator, in performing a version of self, may be bound to certain dominant discourses, but they may also choose to draw upon these discourses in order to counter them (Van De Mieroop & Clifton, 2016; Bamberg, 2004). With respect to their interactional situatedness, this study thus explores how these dominant discourses are both reproduced and resisted by social actors in this site of queer North-South contact by paying analytical attention to the smaller, and less visible, stories that emerge from the interviews.

A crucial caveat to this section is to make clear my own position as a white, queer, male, middle-class academic from the Global North who is, somewhat paradoxically it seems, approaching his research from a Southern perspective; a perspective which some might claim

I have no right to speak from. It is, however, a self-questioning reflexivity of this kind which is essential to both queer and ethnographic research approaches, and, as Milani and Lazar (2017) in fact make clear, these contradictions can be key to accessing Southern perspectives. In this way, recognizing and acknowledging the complexity of our positions can, as they explain, allow for the creation of new theoretical and discursive spaces and possibilities (cf. Milani, 2014). Along these lines, I aim to demonstrate in this paper that it was through a constant reflexive consideration of my own position and narrative in the field and through co-constructed dialogue with my Cambodian participants, that theoretical insights into our practices began to emerge.

The study in context

In this section, I will therefore briefly situate the theoretical and methodological concerns highlighted above in the context of this study through a personal narrative. This research was conducted in response to my experiences as a visitor, where I had met and conversed with local men through spending time in the social spaces that constitute a highly visible “gay scene” in the city. This appears as a constellation of bars, hotels, saunas, and accompanying guidebooks, adorned with the symbols of gay cultures of the Global North and directed towards the “gay” (male) tourist. In the many informal conversations I had with local men in English (ostensibly the lingua franca of this “international scene”), they often foregrounded their desires to meet non-Cambodian male partners by participating in this “scene”, citing conservative and judgemental attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Cambodia (see Hoefinger, Ly & Srun, 2017, for an overview on attitudes to same-sex desires in contemporary Cambodia). However,

through these discussions I also began to develop a growing awareness of how the relationships they spoke about were moving beyond what I, uncritically in my capacity as a visitor, had previously believed to be based on a shared sexual affinity. For example, “gay” identifications and the assertion of the rights of sexual minorities in Cambodia were seen to converge with, or “leak” (Yep, 2003) into the need for development, education, and social/economic mobility. Further conversations revealed how relationships they could potentially form with Northern men were often termed as “sponsorship” arrangements. These were discussed as arrangements in which the non-Cambodian provides a form of mentorship, often with financial support, to enable and empower, by paying for education or buying material goods or even in some cases setting their local partner up in business (see Rowlett, in press, for a more detailed analysis of how “sponsorship” is defined in this setting). However, it also became clear that many of these relationships were transactional, as various degrees of intimacy appeared to be exchanged for this support.

On the face of it, the sexualised spaces I had ventured into, which bring “economically mobile” men from the North into contact with “impoverished” locals, seemed to align with globally pervasive imaginings of areas of the Global South where the sex “trade” has become the focal feature (Hoefinger, 2013). These imaginings predictably bring with them and reproduce dominant discourses of sex work, exploitation, victimization, and the contravention of both hetero and homonormative moral orders. On the other hand, I was also becoming more fully aware of an alternative, more obscure narrative; of how the local men I spoke to sought to resist and transcend such positionings by presenting themselves through the mobilisation of affective linguistic and paralinguistic resources as “worthy” of support. Discursively realised through narratives of Cambodia’s recent tragic history and embodied in the ubiquitous presence of NGOs in the social, touristic and linguistic landscape, that work towards the empowerment of locals in the development of Cambodia (Sharpley & McGrath, 2017), I began to appreciate

how these relationships may find currency and authentication via the formation of powerful and affective subject positions on both sides. Crucially, this included my own emotional responses to the stories I was hearing about locals' lived experiences in this "context of poverty and development" and the ways in which I, and others like me, may be able to help. In the light of this contextualising narrative, this study was therefore conceived as a means to explore more critically, and cast a queer eye on, the discursive complexities through which same-sex "sponsorship" relations are initiated, maintained, and justified at this sexualised intersection of the Global North and South.

Methodological approach

With respect to the complexities outlined above, this research utilizes ethnographic fieldwork methods in order to conduct the analysis from a "middle-ground" approach (De Fina, 2013). This is an approach often used in discourse-based narrative analysis (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012) that aims to maintain both a narrow focus on the "here and now" of spoken interaction, and attention to the wider discursive territory that surrounds and informs them (De Fina, 2013). Gaining this level of understanding involves accessing both *emic* and *etic* perspectives. The *emic* is achieved through engagement with the lives of participants in the field and an ongoing analysis of experiences and encounters. This is balanced with the *etic* which helps us establish, with recourse to other data sets or frames of knowledge, how commonalities, identities and positions accessed *emically* are set in and shaped by wider sociohistorical, economic, and cultural processes i.e. in the case of this study tourism, discourses of development, and Cambodian sexual politics (see papers in Brickell & Springer,

2017). During the course of this research I have attempted to achieve these perspectives through a recursive process of interviewing, observation, note-making, reading, writing, and reflection, so as to provide a “thick” description to aid the interpretation of the stories co-constructed with participants in this paper.

The data was generated over three years during which I made repeat fieldwork trips to the city, lasting from two weeks to longer periods where I stayed for months at a time. Participants were primarily recruited using a process of “snowball sampling” through local contacts I had made while staying at a “gay friendly” hotel. These were staff members in their twenties or early thirties who openly identified as having same-sex desires. I was also able to recruit others by developing social relationships with local men I met in bars and clubs. In order to establish an “ethical identity” (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2003), I joined in with social activities, offered help with English language studies, and by doing so made myself known around the community as a researcher who was interested in discussing issues of language learning, sexuality and transnational relationships. Informed consent was obtained from each participant ¹in which it was made clear that I would not be asking intrusive questions about their sexual activities and that they could refuse to answer any question. In total, I recorded and coded over forty hours of interviews with ten local participants, some interviewed on multiple occasions but others only once or twice. Interviews were conducted in spaces in which participants said they felt comfortable; usually in quiet corners of “gay friendly” hotels, restaurants and bars.

The approach taken to interviews in this study was to recognise them as co-constructed events, occasioned for the purposes of this research (Talmy, 2010; Van De Mierop & Clifton, 2016). Following Prior (2016), I treated the interviews as “conversational encounters”. This

¹ Ethics approval for this study was granted by the City University of Hong Kong Research Ethics Committee.

meant that participants were given every opportunity to direct the interview towards topics they saw as significant and to ask questions to me about my own experiences and beliefs. This meant also that I actively participated by following up on various topics, encouraging interviewees to provide further information and at times challenging their responses with complementary or conflicting information I had heard from others. The interviews were conducted in English for the following reasons. Firstly, I am unable to speak Khmer. However, and more significantly, many participants made it clear that they wished to be interviewed in English without an interpreter. This they explained was because they were generally not comfortable expressing their sexuality with an unknown fellow Cambodian present (a similar situation discussed by Prior, 2016, in his interviews with L2 sexual minority participants). While I am fully aware that conducting interviews in a second language restricts what can be said or understood, as well as the power relations implicit in such interactions (Pavlenko, 2007), I wish to also make clear that the transnational relationships under discussion are mediated through a second language, usually English. As such, the second language competencies of these men were regarded for the purposes of this study a significant and crucial means through which such relationships are initiated and maintained in this context (Rowlett & King, 2017). Other data sets include extensive field notes in which I recorded observations and informal conversations I had both with participants and other people, visitors and locals, I encountered in the sexualised spaces of the city. All data sets thus “work with and for” one another in the analysis (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 52) towards the middle ground approach stated above.

Analytical approach

A focus on small stories

The focus on small stories in this data is informed by discourse-based approaches in narrative inquiry that contrast with the analysis of “prototypical”, lengthy narrative data of past experiences, usually elicited in research interviews. Attention to the emergence and performance of small stories in interactive contexts, including the interview, can, in this way, allow us to consider and analyse the “fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123, with reference to Hymes, 1996) and how this *in situ* narrative performance impacts and shapes the interaction. This approach has therefore been utilised in this study to bring analytical attention to the stories that may easily be missed (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011). Thus, in the face of dominant narratives circulating around the context and topic of this research, in which men from the Global North may be seen as taking advantage of economically disadvantaged Cambodian men, or economically disadvantaged men seeking “economic sponsors” through forms of sex work, the small stories generated and analysed here, importantly, serve as a counterpoint to such readings. Additionally, and on a more metaphorical level, they may also provide the ex-centric lens through which we can access both queer and Southern perspectives towards scrutinizing centre-aligned normativities and assumptions, as explained earlier in this paper.

Affect as narrative action

The small stories performed in these interview extracts have been selected from the wider data set to enable a close analysis of how affective resources are mobilised towards an awareness of how particular social actions are constructed in this context. Along with the understanding

that emotions are the result of “a complex interplay of forces”, including cultural, social, cognitive, and neurological (Prior, 2016, p. 31; Turner & Stets, 2005), this analysis takes a discursive constructionist (Potter & Hepburn, 2008; Prior, 2016) approach to the interview data. This means that I am not simply focusing on the (emotional) content of the stories, but on how participants in the interaction are actively using affective (and other) resources to manage the telling of their stories in the construction of self-representations, impacts and possible actions. Affect or emotion here, is therefore seen as both a linguistic and interactional resource (Wetherell, 2012; Prior, 2016) made relevant through individuals’ semiotic repertoires (linguistic and paralinguistic). In this way, the analysis encompasses how we draw on discursive resources to establish positions, identities and understandings and how these index, or bring into being, constructions of emotion that drive the affective impact of the storied performance. With respect to the middle ground approach explained above, the analysis also considers the wider discursive and sociocultural/economic context surrounding these affective performances to establish their significance as actions in the formation of transnational same-sex relationships into a local practice of economic support (sponsorship).

Analysis

Extract 1

The first extract (see appendix for transcription conventions) comes from Vit (all names are pseudonyms) who had been introduced to me as an ex-colleague and friend of another participant who worked at the “gay-friendly hotel” I stayed at. In our interview Vit had spoken

of witnessing a number of “sponsorship” relationships formed between local staff members and visitors during his time as a staff member there. In the talk surrounding this extract I had therefore asked a question to Vit about what he considered to be a successful relationship between a local man and a visitor. He responded that some were indeed successful, but others broke down because of what he termed as “lying about poverty”. In making this disclosure he positioned many of his colleagues as seeking multiple “sponsors” by (what sponsors perceived as dishonestly) foregrounding their economic needs. In other words, the relationships were not successful as the non-Cambodian visitors had found out that they were not the only partners/sponsors. I followed up by asking if this was due to “cultural differences”, where the formation of multiple relationships may be in contravention of normative (i.e. Western) moral conventions of intimate same-sex relationships. The extract begins with Vit’s response to this question.

(1)

1. V ...the young Cambodian err people
2. they start to they start to find out
3. that they can find an easy way to get money from the customer
4. BR //yeah yeah
5. V by telling them about HOW how difficult living in Cambodia
6. BR //yeah
7. V after the Pol Pot regime
8. BR umm
9. V yeah I think people still interesting
10. what is the young Cambodian
11. BR //sure
12. V living after the they

13. for the people who born after nineteen eighty
14. BR yeah
15. V so they errm when nineteen eighty
16. when it's come to two thousand and ten
17. BR //yeah
18. V it's err already thirty years
19. BR //thirty years yeah exactly
20. V so (1) they they might be
21. err interesting how these young Cambodian living here
22. BR //yeah
23. V and how they supporting their FAMILY
24. BR //yeah
25. V when they err get a job
26. but earning very earning a salary from a job is very low here
27. BR //umm umm
28. V and err
29. BR //yeah I heard
30. V yeah and umm (1) sometime is difficult of the family
31. BR //so
32. V //of having a loan from a people other people
33. BR //umm
34. V or later on they have a big loan from the BANKS
35. BR //umm umm
36. V and err they using a lot of money for err LIVING
37. BR //umm

38. V err (1) sometimes they trying
39. o get something nice for their family
40. BR //YEAH
41. V but err but they not earn very much MONEY
42. BR umm
43. V yeah but err young Cambodian people later on find out
44. there's a better way to get a sponsor from the FOREIGNER
45. V as a gay people
46. BR //yeah
47. V then (1) then they will do
48. I will do the SAME sure
49. that's what I say
50. I will do the same if I have this opportunity...

Vit initiates a small story in lines 1 to 3, relevant in its tellability in the here and now of the interaction to account for both how and why “young Cambodian people” position themselves in order to “get money from the customer” (“customer” here refers to non-Cambodian patrons of the city’s hotels and bars). As a story preface, it functions to reference the earlier exchange about economic circumstances and set up a series of actions undertaken by the Cambodians to both counteract the dominant narrative of “lying about poverty” towards justifying these as necessary actions. The first action, made explicit by Vit in lines 5 and 7, of “telling them [the visitor/potential sponsor]” immediately invokes emotion by constructing a historical frame of reference to the story – “...HOW difficult living in Cambodia after the Pol Pot regime”. Moving beyond the interaction, data of personal experiences and conversations with others indicate that the affective impact of this historical reference, deployed as an example of an

action taken by the “young Cambodian” in the story, is unlikely to be lost on the visitor. This is because sites associated with the destructive regime of the Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, for example the Choeung Ek Killing Fields and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum feature heavily in the typical Cambodian tourist itinerary. Vit therefore constructs this as a shared narrative between the Cambodian and the visitor by stating his knowledge that the visitor will likely have an interest in the repercussions of the regime on the lives of Cambodians today (lines 9-21). I am also seen to engage in the co-construction of this narrative by offering minimal but affirmative responses (Gardner, 2001) to Vit’s version of the timeline (lines 4,6,8,11 etc.), thus allowing him an extended and uninterrupted stretch of narrative talk in which he can explicate the significance of these tragic events to justify the actions he goes on to describe.

Vit continues his small story by drawing on discourses of poverty to exemplify the difficulties faced by Cambodians in the light of these historical events. This is lexically realised in terms of “low salaries” (lines 26 and 41), the need to take out “loans” (lines 30-32), all with the intention of trying to provide a better life for their families (lines 23 and 39). This listing of economic difficulties succeeds in driving the emotional impact of the performance through which I (and by extension the unnamed generic visitor/customer as a character in the story) am invited to sympathise with the Cambodian who lacks the resources to help their family (family bonds remaining core to Cambodian society (Heuveline, 2017)). Again, my minimal responses serve to fulfil this affective function in the interaction (Ward, 2006), for example– “yeah I heard” (line 29) – and continued use of response tokens (Gardner, 2001), by constructing an epistemic stance through which I represent myself as having some familiarity with the Cambodian context and a sympathetic understanding of the economic problems faced by many young Cambodian men. Vit concludes by re-orienting to the story preface of how young Cambodian men act to get financial support in lines 43 to 45, however this time positioning the

potential “foreigner” sponsor as “gay”. This brings his story back to the original interview topic of same-sex transnational relationships formed between staff and clients in the city’s queer spaces, and how these often converge with “sponsorship” practices. Importantly, Vit’s use of the identity marker “gay” here is not to index same-sex desire or affinity but rather, and in fact more queerly, to emphasise the “opportunity” (line 50) for economic support this label may represent, through intimate encounters facilitated by participation in these spaces.

In sum, Vit’s small story performance, through the mobilisation of affective narrative and linguistic resources, i.e. the recent tragic history of Cambodia where the very name “Pol Pot” indexes tyranny, genocide and suffering, and the resultant circumstances of poverty he lists, is occasioned in this interview as an alternative story, less visible but implicitly more important, that counteracts the master narrative of sexual transaction, deception and the rupture of normative (Western) relationship conventions. As such it acts to justify the actions taken by young Cambodians to seek out intimacy with men from the Global North who offer the potential for economic “sponsorship”. It is also significant as a performance of self. In the telling of this story, Vit shifts from the performance of an epistemic self, as a knowledgeable insider regarding the practices I have asked him to describe, to a construction of an agentive self (Schiffrin, 1996) that aligns with the young Cambodians in his story – “I will do the same sure” (line 48). This works by demonstrating to me, his Western interlocutor, that he and others should not be perceived as dishonestly taking advantage of the non-Cambodian visitors they meet, but conversely are “victims” of their circumstances and shared tragic history, thus “sympathy-worthy” and deserving of economic support.

Extract 2

The performance analysed in this section provides further insights into constructions of selves salient to both the activity of the interview and beyond with respect to practices of economic support. It comes from Dara, one of the first Cambodian men I met as a visitor to the city's queer spaces. I feel that I got to know Dara relatively well, and as a result he began to confide in me the practical and emotional troubles he was having, usually about his lack of money and arguments he had with his Western boyfriend (Dara's term of identification) who visited him each year. However, Dara was also described to me by non-Cambodian acquaintances as a "money boy", a pejorative term used locally to index a male sex worker, and I was advised to be wary of him for this reason. This was not a label that I ever brought up with him, although I have to admit it I became intrigued by Dara's story for the purposes of my research. In addition, as I got to know him better, he approached me on various occasions with requests for small monetary loans (10 to 20 US dollars) which I provided wherever possible. These he explained were because he did not have the money to visit his sick mother, or could not pay for medical expenses, or, just simply, because he had run out of money that month. While the giving of money to participants may raise ethical concerns, I wish to highlight my commitment to the relationships I had established with participants. The giving of small amounts of money, buying meals and drinks, helping out with school assignments were not only the least I could offer for their time but also indicative of the "fluctuating borders" of the field (Rooke, 2010, p. 30). This means that I had come to be aware of my position, not only as a researcher, but as an older, Western visitor who is positioned in this context of poverty and development as being expected to help (see above), and, as such, affording me with significant emotional insight.

The extract which follows is taken from the beginning of our one and only interview, in which I had purposefully solicited emotion talk (Prior, 2016). This was in order to learn more about Dara's motivations in the relationships he has formed with men from the Global North and especially about his attitudes towards them. His response was to immediately position these

men as “very sweet” and as having “good hearts” as they had often “helped” him. He also made clear that he had learned much from these men, to which I make a request for further examples of what he had learned, thus initiating Dara’s discursive actions that build towards the telling of a highly emotional small story in this extract.

(2)

1. BR ...can you be a little like for EXAMPLE
2. what kind of things do you learn (2)
3. D you know (1) for example (1) from the heart (1)
4. BR okay ((laughs))
5. D yes (1) that’s true
6. BR uhm (1)
7. D foreigners most foreigners they so (1)
8. they have so good heart for Cambodian people yeah
9. BR //like a GENEROUS heart^
10. D //generous yes (2) AMAZING for me
11. BR //uhm
12. D sometimes sometimes I CRY^
13. BR //uhm
14. D you know when I (1) they TOUCH my heart
15. BR okay
16. D because (3) I can say I growing with a POOR family
17. BR //yeah
18. D and BIG and I never I can’t (1)
19. I don’t say I don’t have WARM from my MOM
20. BR //uhm

21. D but I I don't get ((inaudible)) from my father
22. BR right right
23. D //yeah that is the reason when [name] PROTECTS me
24. or when they (1) yeah (2) ah
25. ((sighs as tears well up in his eyes)) (3)
26. BR it's okay we don't have to (1)
27. D just (1) just make me cry now
28. BR //yeah okay
29. D //to make me sad like that
30. BR no we don't have to talk about this but I
31. I think it's really it's really important
32. D BUT
33. BR //because you know
34. there is that difference between
35. you get this warmth
36. D //yeah
37. BR //from the foreigners that COME here
38. D yeah
39. BR that maybe you DIDN'T get (1) when you were growing up
40. D //yeah
41. BR //yeah okay (1) that's cool (1)
42. D you know they are not my FAMILY
43. BR no
44. D but
45. BR //not your RELATIVES (1)

46. D but SOMETIMES they DO more things than my family...

Dara begins his response to the question, not by recounting a specific example, but by explaining that what he has learned has come “from the heart” (line 3). Despite my laughter (line 4), on reflection a somewhat cynical reaction to these repeated references to the heart, Dara reclaims his epistemic authority in this exchange by insisting that this is “true” (line 5) and repeats his earlier assertion that most “foreigners” have a “good heart for Cambodian people” (line 8). Other conversations and encounters recorded in the data likewise draw attention to semiotic resources such as “good heart”, or “angel” that are deployed to accentuate the esteem that Cambodians have for the western visitor. The value placed on the heart in Cambodian culture, in stories, proverbs and “virtuous” social conduct (Hoefinger, 2013) should be noted here. However, I would also suggest that the action of this repeated positioning is highly affective. This is mainly because, as Hoefinger (2013) explains in the context of her study into the practices of Cambodian “professional girlfriends”, it succeeds in creating a discursive space through which the Western visitor may feel pleasure and gratification by offering help and support. Indeed, this was an emotion I myself experienced in response to Dara’s gratitude after I had provided him with the small loans he requested. In reaction to Dara’s insistence on the “truth”, I therefore repair my response by aligning to his talk with a semantic reframing of “good heart”, suggesting it also means a “GENEROUS heart” (line 9). Again, this move constructs an epistemic stance that both demonstrates to Dara my understanding of the ways in which the non-Cambodian visitor often helps and supports the local, as well as performing this identity myself. Dara accepts this repair and infuses the shared understanding we have reached at this point with emotion, saying it is “AMAZING for me” (line 10).

He continues to pursue this line of talk by constructing a story preface in which he emphasises, through explicit emotion terms, the impact the supportive actions of these men

have had on him – they “TOUCH [his] heart” in such a way that he is often brought to tears – “sometimes I CRY” (lines 12-14). The small story that Dara tells from lines 16 to 21 is unsolicited but its tellability is established in order to help me make sense of the emotions he has just described. Narrating from a subject position as a Cambodian boy, growing up in a “BIG” and “POOR family” (lines 16-18) Dara explains that although he felt some “WARM from my MOM” (line 19) he did not get the same from his father (line 21). The telling of this story is thus directed towards foregrounding the emotional impoverishment of his prior experiences compared to the present. This is an emotional gap that appears in his story to have been potentially filled by the older Western men he forms relationships with. As such, and referencing the story preface, Dara positions his Western boyfriend as protector – “that is the reason when [name] PROTECTS me” (line 23) – and correspondingly performs a position of vulnerability for himself. He appears to end his small story with a dramatic display of paralinguistic affective resources; the sighing and tears which he then articulates to emphasise his distress – “just...make me cry now” (line 27). The memories that he has been called upon to relive “make [him] sad like that” (line 29), as he relates his experiences growing up in a large impoverished family in post-genocide Cambodia.

His story, and accompanying tears, succeed in provoking an emotional response on my part (Heritage, 2011; Hepburn & Potter, 2012) where I realise that my line of questioning has perhaps gone too far – “we don’t have to talk about this” (line 30) – and is therefore an instance of emotion work (Gilbert, 2001; Prior, 2016) that drives the co-construction of affect in this interview. However, in my pursuit of this topic for the purposes of the interview and my research – “I think it’s really important” (line 31) – I continue to steer this emotional line of talk by offering a reformulation of Dara’s story. Reformulations have been identified as a common discursive resource through which interactants foreground and manage emotion in both the storyworld and interactional world of the interview (Prior, 2016). Reformulations

provide a means of not only glossing prior talk to indicate attentive listening but also of editorialising it. Consequently, in this instance I reformulate Dara's story by both paraphrasing and transforming it, as well as sustaining the emotional content, to fit my understanding and expectations, given my subject position as the non-Cambodian in this interaction – “you get this warmth...from the foreigners that COME here...that maybe you DIDN'T get when you were growing up” (lines 34-39). Dara offers confirmation of this by repeating “yeah”, a means by which interviewees can approve the interviewer's reformulation and at the same time assert epistemic superiority over their stories, experiences, and perspectives (Heritage, 2011; Prior, 2016). This reformulation sequence however is seen to interrupt Dara's story in which he signalled he had more to say - “BUT” (line 32). Having accepted my reformulation Dara thus moves to provide this closure to his story by stating that the non-Cambodian men he has met are “not my FAMILY...but SOMETIMES they DO more things than my family” (lines 42-46). I, again, provide a brief editorial reformulation of this and sustain my subject position as a non-Cambodian as well as implicitly including myself as one of the men in Dara's story - “not your RELATIVES” (line 45).

In tandem with Vit's account, Dara's small story functions here, and in answer to my line of questioning, to queer the normativities through which transnational (and transactional) same-sex relationships may be read in this context. As a performance of self, his mobilisation of affective linguistic and paralinguistic resources constructs a vulnerability that not only foregrounds his disadvantaged economic circumstances, drawing again on dominant discourses of poverty in this context, but also his impoverished emotional state, and therefore performs a version of himself as sympathy-worthy. By positioning the Western men with “good hearts” (including me as his interlocutor and friend) as being able to fulfil this emotional gap, his story also functions as social action. This is because his affective repertoires, as evidenced here, serve to elevate the emotional role of the non-Cambodian benefactor in his life, while the

traditional bonds of family that permeate Khmer society have been extended to include them. This, I suggest, aids in the construction of conditions that ensure a lasting emotional impact with the resultant expectation of their responding with further acts of support.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis conducted here can only provide a limited account of the discursive features of the complex social practice I sought to explore in this research. However, by drawing attention to manifestations of this practice, in the small stories of social actors operating in the queer spaces of one intersection of the Global North and South, it has been my intention to begin to address how a focus on small stories can align with the application of both queer and Southern perspectives to narrative data. This has been to demonstrate how normative and dominant assumptions associated with transnational same-sex relationships formed in disparate sites of North/South sexualised contact, and the stigmatisation these assumptions often sustain, can be scrutinised through the heuristic lens of a Southern vantage point (Milani, 2014; Milani & Lazar, 2017). In the small stories analysed here, we have therefore seen how dominant narratives of sexual transaction, of economically mobile men from the Global North taking advantage of impoverished local men, or of local men acting dishonestly to secure economic support through forms of sex work, have been reshaped through participants' performances of lived experiences in this context.

It is within the micro instances of meaning-making analysed as small stories here that co-constructed narrative deployments of affect therefore emerge as a significant empirical feature of this practice. Affect in these cases is not only indicative of the expectations of desires

and intimacies associated with relationship practices, but is also actively and intersubjectively achieved in the here and now of the interaction. Accordingly, mobilisations of affect in these instances, with explicit attention to the situatedness of their production, a research interview between Cambodians and a researcher from the Global North, are seen in their capacity to drive and shape the discourse towards authenticating the formation of these relationships as social action. These are actions that are seen to counter prevailing and stigmatising assumptions as participants mobilise affective resources to perform selves that are sympathy-worthy, and thus deserving of support.

Ultimately, the interpretation of these practices has been shaped by a personal, reflexive, and affective narrative, based on my ethnographic experiences, interests, and choices as a researcher/participant in this North/South contact zone. As such it represents one, localised and dialogical narrative of transnational same-sex relationship practices, albeit one that has sought to critically engage with discursive concepts that generally privilege knowledge from the centre; a position from which I am undoubtedly operating. There is of course the potential for the construction of alternative narratives, where, for example, the powerful position occupied by the globally mobile gay male from the Global North both defines and constrains the actions taken by locals under these circumstances. However, by foregrounding instances of locally sensitive ways of understanding, the queer and Southern perspectives I have emphasised here have been directed towards the development of further theoretical and discursive spaces, specifically with respect to the dynamics of sexuality and power flows between North and South (Milani & Lazar, 2017; see also Hoefinger, 2013; Rowlett & King, 2017), and the interrelations between economies and emotions (Katigbak, 2015). In this way, the social practice addressed in this paper is, I suggest, manifested as a form of queer action that reshapes these dynamics. Accordingly, the economically, sexually, and socially marginalised male participants in this study have demonstrated their potential for action, by discursively and

transformatively shaping the local conditions of possibility that constitute this sexualised North/South intersection to their advantage.

To conclude, it is when exploring and making sense of practices in the Global South through centre-aligned concepts of global development, exploitation, empowerment, sexual identities and desires, moral orders, and affect that we may encounter a discursive territory where such “certainties” are less than clear cut (Milani, 2014). In this article, I have hoped to demonstrate that a small story approach, in combination with queer and Southern perspectives, has the potential to bring more nuance to these explorations through the epistemological and methodological orientations it shares with these perspectives. These, like those of narrative inquiry, are reflexive approaches that favour the experiences and agentic and affective voices of social actors in highly contextualised and complex local settings (Riessman, 1993; Marais, 2015, and, in this way, may succeed in counteracting the stigmatisations raised in this paper by unfettering subjugated knowledges and practices. This can then allow us to critically and responsibly re-examine our own ethical practices, identities, and interpretations and realise the theoretical and methodological possibilities of a North-South dialogue towards a more equitable production of knowledge.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

- // Slashes indicate overlapping speech
- WORD Capitalised words indicate audibly emphasised words compared to the surrounding talk
- (1) Numbers in parentheses indicate length of pause
- (()) Double parentheses contain prosodic contributions, for example laughter
- [] Square parentheses contain changes to the transcript, for example when identifiable people or places are mentioned