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Negotiating Children's Ethnic Identity in the Highlands of Vietnam

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Abstract

Based on data gathered during a Young Lives research in the highlands of Vietnam, this paper examines children's perceptions of similarities and differences between themselves and children from other ethnic groups, and the meanings they give to belonging to an ethnic group. Taking advantage of an approach that combines discursive analysis and the anthropological concept of agency, the paper highlights the cultural construction of children's identities as well as children's critical capacities. It is also an attempt, through exposing the dynamics of field interactions, to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a critical, self-reflective approach to the production of ethnographic knowledge.

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1. Introduction

In initial conversations with Hmong, H'Roi and Kinh children in our anthropological research on education for ethnic minorities in Vietnam, respondents seemed unwilling to talk in detail about children from other ethnic groups living in the same locality and going to the same school. Kinh children hesitated to say the names of the ethnic groups of their classmates. None of the participating children, whether of majority or minority ethnicity, acknowledged their visits to the houses of classmates from different ethnic groups. As an attempt to tackle what appeared to be a display of social distance, researchers in our team adopted a different strategy: instead of asking about children from a specific ethnic group with an officially recognised ethnonym, we asked respondents to comment on their classmates and friends who did not come from their neighbourhood. Only then did a host of expressions for difference come to the fore. Most of these utterances were locality-based such as 'Ea Mua schoolmates' vs. 'Van Lam schoolmates', 'kids from the village' vs. 'those who live at the T-junction', and 'people from [that] far out' vs. 'crossroads people', etc.

This minor setback that prompted a shift in inquiry techniques in our research reminds us of Keith Taylor's critique of the ethnonym, Muong (K. Taylor 2001). Taylor offers an alternative reading of a local text from the turn of the 20th century that does not take for granted modern categorisation of peoples according to language, socio-economic patterns and habitat, often cast as 'scientific'. In this reading, the markers of differences between peoples in pre-French northern Vietnam were not necessarily language or culture; they could be locality or the type of terrain where people lived (see also Keyes 2002). Moreover, the text seems to be concerned more with unity or similarities between peoples than differences and boundaries. Taylor's emphasis on the importance of understanding local perceptions of differences and similarities provides a starting point for this paper.

In this paper, I will examine children's perceptions of similarities and differences between themselves and children from other ethnic groups, and the meanings they give to belonging to an ethnic group. I will do so by drawing on the recent feminist critique of the notion of the Other and the concepts of performativity and agency in anthropological studies. In the meantime, as an attempt to address the problem of representation of children in childhood studies, I will try to reflect on changing power relations between the researcher and the researched in the process of negotiating ethnographic accounts of children's ethnic identity.

Before presenting qualitative data from field research conducted in Lao Cai and Phu Yen in 2008, I will look briefly into the problems of the Other and ethnicity, as well as the potential usefulness of the concepts of performativity and agency.

2. Theoretical approaches

2.1 Ethnicity and locating the Other

The field of anthropology, inherently concerned with the Other,¹ has for a long time cross-fertilised with the fields of philosophy, historiography, literary studies, cultural studies, linguistics, etc, in their critiques of the conceptualisation of the Other. The observations made by Seyla Benhabib (1992) in moral philosophy are particularly relevant to an area of inquiry like children and childhood where researchers tend to come across moral judgments from informants of all ages in the field. Benhabib makes a distinction between the 'generalised Other' and the 'concrete Other'. The concept of the generalised Other is based on an assumption that what constitutes the Other's 'moral dignity is not what differentiates us from each other, but rather what we... have in common' (Benhabib 1992: 158). Conversely, the concept of the concrete Other requires a withdrawal from commonality and a focus on individuality. Individuals are understood with a concrete history, identity and an emotional configuration.

For Benhabib, Western universalised notions of the self and morality demonstrate an 'epistemological blindness toward the concrete Other' (Benhabib 1992: 164). This view denies individuals' concrete characteristics and perspectives and turns them into abstract agents disengaged from the most basic bond of dependence. Benhabib aims her critique at the failure in moral decision-making due to what John Rawls calls 'the veil of ignorance condition'² that only permits knowledge of others as generalised and not as concrete (Rawls 1971). Behind this veil of ignorance, the otherness of the Other disappears, and with it the differences and the notion of distinct self. It follows that a genuine moral vision only works when 'the identity of the Other as distinct from the self, not merely in the sense of bodily otherness but as a concrete Other, is retained' (Benhabib 1992: 10). To this end, a vision of feminist ethics has to be built on knowledge of the Others as both concrete and generalised.

I find the above feminist critique is translatable to anthropological studies of children and in fact, there have been parallels in the two fields. About the same time when Benhabib was posing her critique of the generalised Other, Allison James (1993) voiced concern over the generalised category of children, or an abstract 'the child', created through the construction of children's otherness in the form of children's culture or childhood. In as much as Benhabib urges us to retain the identity of the Other as concrete, James calls for personifying children through discovering the self-conscious individuals submerged beneath the generalised category and identity. Just as Benhabib asserts the importance of confirming not only the humanity but also the individuality in every individual (Benhabib 1992: 159), James believes in anthropological approaches that help 'restore to children their conscious humanity' (James 1993: 31).

1 The 'Other' is a concept in philosophy that refers to that which is different from a concept that is being considered. In the mid-twentieth century, the term was coined and renewed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Burggraeve 2008). The concept is increasingly gaining currency in the fields of gender studies, historiography, cultural studies and anthropology through the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Edward Said, among others (see also Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989).

2 John Rawls' metaphor of 'veil of ignorance' refers to a mental barrier that prevents a person from using specific concerns to access principles of justice. This barrier allows an individual to formulate a standard of justice without being fully aware, i.e., being ignorant, of her place in or value to society (Rawls 1971).

In response to James' renewed warning against generalisation at the expense of children's varying experiences (James 2007), recent childhood studies increasingly point toward the diversity and subtleties of children's experience of ethnicity at the intersection of gender and class in specific political and socio-economic contexts (Connolly 2006; Hernandez 2002; Jordan 2006). In line with these studies, research on Vietnam has started to depart from a simplistic categorisation of 'minorities versus majority' and become sensitive to the diverse experiences of different ethnic minority groups. Baulch et al. (2002), for instance, bring out the varying degrees in which different ethnic minority clusters benefit from recent socio-economic development in Vietnam. A recent World Bank study indicates an increased differentiation among ethnic minority populations (World Bank 2009). With a focus on children's experience of schooling, I highlight elsewhere the contrasting impacts of education-related policies and socio-economic development programmes across different ethnic groups and among the same groups (Truong 2010b).

In parallel with a problematisation of the Other in research on children, their ethnic identity, or ethnicity, has also to be scrutinised. In this paper, I adopt a constructivist approach in which ethnicity is understood as a social construct resulting from continual negotiation between children and adults of the same and different ethnic groups and among children themselves. This negotiation occurs in the effects of, and contributes to, the discourse on ethnicity of the Vietnamese state, which permeates schooling, media and popular culture. Recent studies have noted the discrepancy between the state-sanctioned ethnic classification, often cast as scientific, on the one hand, and local peoples' self-identification and perceptions of difference of the Other (Nguyen Van Thang 2007; see also Keyes 2002; Salemink 2003; K. Taylor 2001; and P. Taylor 2003). Ethnonyms, as is argued by these authors, are often the outcomes of contingent interactions with neighbouring or dominant groups and have been historically fluid (Hickeys 1982; Nakamura 1999; Salemink 2003; Nguyen Van Thang 2007). While local peoples may 'recognize and accept the designation [of ethnonyms] used by others' (Hickeys 1982:4, quoted by Salemink 2003: 30), their perceptions of difference, as in the example given at the beginning of this paper, may have very little to do with language but instead, among other things, with locality or type of terrain (K. Taylor 2001: 28; Keyes 2002: 1173).

In line with this critical view of ethnic classification and self-identification in Vietnam, this research does not take for granted ethnonyms such as Hmong, H'Roi, or Kinh and the categorisation that is first and foremost based on linguistic difference. It is instead an inquiry into children's own perceptions of differences and similarities between themselves and their peers, and how they acquire and communicate these perceptions. Moreover, we are interested not only in children's views of ethnic markers but also their understanding and experience of belonging to an ethnic group. As children negotiate and experience their identities in their social relations underlined by the existing local power structure, we need now to look into the utility of the concept of performativity of identity in relation to discourse analysis and the anthropological conception of agency.

2.2 Children's identities: performativity and agency

The concept of performativity is put forward by Judith Butler with reference to gender (Butler 1993). Gender performativity, according to Butler, is not an act, especially in a theatrical sense, but 'reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (1993: 2). It follows that identity categories such as gender are not the natural effects of the body, or expressions of pre-existing self through the body, but instead the products of power regimes constituting the subject:

Gender performativity is not a question of instrumentally deploying a 'masquerade', for such a construal of performativity presupposes an intentional subject behind the deed. On the contrary, gender performativity involves the difficult labour of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose (Butler 1995: 136).

In her critique of Butler's concept of performativity, Benhabib posits that this poststructuralist conception of the subjectivity is incompatible with critical theory and feminism, which are premised on the concepts of autonomy and critique. Nancy Fraser, however, points out that despite the anti-humanist and self-distancing language, Butler's emphasis on 'the power's own possibility of resignification'³ suggests that she also believes in what Fraser terms 'critical capacities', i.e., the ability to engage in novel actions and to modify social conditions (Fraser 1995: 66). Fraser suggests a middle ground for a fruitful integration in feminist theorising, i.e., to 'conceive subjectivity as endowed with critical capacities *and* as culturally constructed' (Fraser 1995: 71). A difficulty, nonetheless, arises from Butler's conception of agency as 'a contingent possibility that is the effect of historically specific discursive conditions and power relations' (Butler 1995): how is one to account for these conditions and their associated power relations?

One way of exploring the effects of particular discursive conditions and power relations is to investigate their sources ethnographically, as in anthropological studies concerning subjectivity, agency, and power (Ortner 2006). Agency in anthropological studies, as advanced by Ortner's works, is firmly grounded on humanistic liberal traditions of inquiry, according to which agency is a part of fundamental humanness and is always culturally and historically constructed. While Ortner welcomes post-structuralist-inspired cultural analyses investigating the ways in which discourse constructs subjects, she points out that many of such analyses 'are ethnographically thin: thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas' (Ortner 2006: 61). Central to this problem that Ortner terms 'ethnographic refusal' are the failure to account for internal politics and cultural authenticity of dominated groups and the problem of representation.

Falling short of addressing these problems can turn even a rich research study into an ethnographic refusal. Helle Rydstrom's monograph, the first anthropological study on Vietnamese children, suffers from a number of flaws concerning the authenticity of the native view the anthropologist chooses to represent and internal politics of power in the studied community (Rydstrom 2003). At the heart of Rydstrom's interpretation of the socialisation of children's gender morality in a northern Vietnamese village is the 'blank slate' metaphor of children's bodies. According to Rydstrom, since children are thought of as a blank slate, they can be induced into contrasting body styles: submissiveness for girls and conspicuous space-occupying for boys. Embodied in each of these styles is its corresponding morality: sentiments or feeling (*tinh cam*) for girls, and honour (*danh du*), reputation (*uy tin*) and morality (*dao duc*) for boys. This 'blank slate' metaphor, however, turns out to be taken from adult informants without references to children's own perception. One little knows whether children can negotiate the gender identity prescribed for them. Likewise, one learns little of the power relations between the researcher and the researched in the process of knowledge production and how their interactions affect the knowledge produced.

3 'Signification' is a term in linguistic anthropology and discourse analysis that refers to an act of signifying by signs or by other symbolic means; 'resignification' means a repetition of that act.

There are, nonetheless, effective ways to address the problem of representation. Instead of subsuming children to a single logic of the embodiment of gender, other studies place the question of identity at the intersection of gender, age, ethnicity and class in the political and economic context specific to each locality (Nguyen Van Chinh 2001; Nguyen T. T. Binh 2002; Duong 2006). These studies draw attention to children's choice and agency in the context of the unequal power relations in their families and communities. In her study of language socialisation of children in a village in northern Vietnam, Nguyen T. T. Binh points out that 'children actively participated in the process of socialisation' and 'collectively acted against a certain structure imposed upon them' while adhering to the constraints imposed by other power structures (Nguyen T. T. Binh 2002: 221). Nguyen Van Chinh's study reveals the complexity of children's choices on leaving school in the context of their unequal relations with family members, peers, and teachers (Nguyen Van Chinh 2001). In her rich ethnography that captures Hmong girls' journeys from a 'traditional' to a 'modern' world through their active engagement in local tourism, Duong Bich Hanh demonstrates that the Hmong girls in Sa Pa 'are conscious agents who make decisions and pursue goals within, and at times despite, often difficult circumstances' (Duong 2006: 17). As Hmong girls 'can make a choice between getting married, continuing their working life, or combining both', they effectively negotiate a new identity that mediates between village-confined and global worlds (2006: 19).

Elsewhere I have discussed the ways in which children in a Red River Delta village make sense of their experiences of hard work, lack of nurturing care, tensions and emotional stress as the result of an intensified labour process following the seasonal migration of the major workforce to the city. The language of devotional love (*thuong*) and filial piety (*hieu*), I have argued, is not a pre-given model into which children are to be socialised. Instead, through an implicit understanding of what to expect and how to lay claims on oneself and other family members, children actively navigate through conflicting emotions (Truong 2009: 309).

These studies defy 'ethnographic refusal' by not only bringing to light children's agency but also exposing the internal politics among the researched as well as reflecting on the role of the researcher. Duong Bich Hanh's work, together with that of Nguyen T. T. Binh, are part of a new trend led by Vietnamese Western-trained anthropologists whose ethnography is enriched by a constructivist reflexivity on the role of researchers in the inter-subjective co-production of anthropological knowledge.⁴

This paper will now attempt to apply its critique of the notion of the Other, performativity and agency. For an anthropologist interested in children's perspectives and experience of ethnic identity, there are at least two 'Others' to take into account: the researcher's Other, i.e. the children she studies, and children's Other, i.e. the particular individuals or groups of children from whom child informants distinguish themselves. Bearing in mind the conceptual distinction between generalised and concrete Other, I will examine how ethnicity is constituted through both discursive and non-discursive practice engaging children and their peers at home and in school. In the meantime, following a constructive approach towards the power relations between the researcher and the researched (Mayall 2000), I will try to reflect on my own and my colleagues' knowledge of the Other as generalised and concrete. By doing so, I hope to avoid the pitfall of 'ethnographic refusal' and to arrive at a better understanding of the ways in which each party engages in the negotiation of ethnographic accounts of children's ethnic identity.

4 See also Nguyen Thu Huong 2007 and Pham 2009.

3. Methods

3.1 The research

The research for this paper was conducted in two mountainous sites in Lao Cai and Phu Yen provinces in Vietnam in 2008 (Truong 2010a).⁵ Since 2002, different teams of researchers and survey workers have been sent by Young Lives to the field sites in five provinces to collect quantitative and qualitative data on sampled children, their families and communities. Our study in 2008 was the first one carried out by trained anthropologists, focusing on education for ethnic minority children and the relationships between children from different ethnic groups at school and beyond. During the fieldwork, five anthropologists – three women, two men, all Kinh (the majority) – had extensive daily contact with 12 Kinh, Hmong, and H'Roi children aged 12 to 13 years. In both research sites, the villages are located in the uplands within a commutable distance from the commune's centre, while the Kinh neighbourhood is at the same time the commune's centre. The socio-economic differentiation in both localities is observable in the daily life. It is also salient in the discourse about government aid embraced by local officials and villagers.

In the field, each researcher stayed at a child's house continuously for a week, followed by additional visits after moving on to the next child in the same community. Since none of the researchers spoke the local language, exchanges with ethnic minority children were held in Vietnamese. The children's command of the Vietnamese language varied from extended conversations for the H'Roi to limited communication for most of the Hmong. Sometimes in the latter cases, translation assistance from an elder sibling or relation was solicited. In recruiting interpreters, researchers took special care not to increase the unequal power relations between the child and the interpreter. While the participation of the researcher in the child's daily life was set as an aim, it was only achieved toward the second half of the field stay, partly owing to language constraints. Therefore researchers' notes of non-verbal communication and observation of children's daily activities serve as an important source of data.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three parts. The first concerns children's perceptions of the differences and similarities between themselves and children of other ethnic groups. These perceptions are elicited from children's speech in natural situations and in semi-structured research events. In an attempt to explore children's agency in the performativity of identities, the next section discusses non-verbal interactions between children and researchers, drawing attention to the changing power relations between researchers and the researched. The last section is devoted to a critical reflection on the process of co-producing knowledge, through which children actively engage in negotiating ethnographic accounts about them.

5 The research was conducted as part of Young Lives, an innovative international longitudinal study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. It seeks to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being, and to inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty. To this end, the lives of 12,000 children growing up in four developing countries – Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam – are tracked over 15 years (www.younglives.org.uk).

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Children's perceptions of difference and sameness

The three vignettes presented in this section reveal an ambiguity and at times contradictions in children's perceptions of differences and similarities between themselves and their ethnic Other. For children who participated in these interactions, markers of difference such as locality, language, learning ability, etc., are not fixed or indelible. Instead, children's recognition of the commonness of human qualities and their specific personal proximity tend to prevail over ethnic differences. The stories below testify to the contingency of ethnic identity as it is articulated by children from various communities in this research.

'She's not an ethnic because she speaks Kinh'

Seven-year-old Huong and her 13-year-old sister, Phuong, were playing together in their living room. In the adjoining open space used as their mother's tailoring workshop, H'Mien, in her early twenties, was practising on a sewing machine. Mien was one of a few H'Roi young people in Ea Mua who had been to the district boarding school and received a high school diploma. For a few months, she came to Huong and Phuong's mother's shop to be trained as a tailor.

Researcher [to Phuong and Huong]: So, have you ever been to Ea Mua?

Huong: Never.

Phuong: Not true! Dad has driven us past Ea Mua many times.

Researcher: Really? Have you ever visited a home there?

Huong: Never. We've never been to a house [that] far out. It's kind of dirty out there. Mum wouldn't let us stay.

Phuong: Not true! We've been to sister Mien's house!

Mien [pausing the sewing machine]: Hey, Huong, don't you remember seeing the pigs at my place?

Huong: I do!

Researcher: Tell me about that, Huong.

Huong: Uhm, we were there all day. We saw the squash. And the pigs were kind of funny.

Phuong: So why do you say you don't like going into an ethnic home, then?

Huong: But sister Mien is not an ethnic!

Researcher: How so?

Phuong [teasing]: Eu eu eu, you don't know which ethnic group sister Mien comes from!

Huong: Of course I know! Sister Mien is a H'Roi. H'Roi is like a *roi* [in Vietnamese 'a beating cane']. Eu eu eu, H'Roi is a beating cane, H'Roi is a beating cane [chants while running in small circle in front of Mien].

Phuong [scolding]: Huong! You can't speak to sister Mien like that!

Mien [giggling, dismissing *Phuong's* reproach, and turning to *Huong*]: Why do you say I am not an ethnic then?

[*Huong* stops circling and stays quiet for a moment.]

Researcher: Tell me why.

Huong: She's not an ethnic because she speaks Kinh.

Huong's utterances in this conversation show a clear shift from her knowledge of the Other as generalised to that of the Other as concrete. Locality as a marker of difference, or the 'dirty' places in her words, describes what she thinks of a generalised state of H'Roi habitat. In the meantime, a whole day of fun learning about the garden and livestock at the H'Roi home of a particular person she knew was too concrete to deny. Thanks to the fond memory of being at ease in *Mien's* place, for *Huong* the boundary between her neighbourhood and the village is permeable. In the same vein, linguistic difference is for *Huong* not 'an indelible mark of ethnic or cultural difference' (K. Taylor 2001: 28). In so far as *Mien* can pass to be a Kinh person in *Huong's* eyes simply by speaking Vietnamese fluently, *Huong* too let herself make fun of *Mien's* ethnonym by attaching a Vietnamese meaning to a H'Roi word. Ethnicity is, for *Huong*, ambiguous at best, since in her experience words and persons can be translated from one place to another. Her perception of ethnic difference has not been dominated by the rigid official classification and parental teaching, as reported in her recollection of her mother's warning, because for her, personal proximity at times prevails.

The following is another example of the ambiguity in children's perception of difference, this time under the influence of a reversibility of unequal relationships between peers of different ethnic groups.

Between a classmate and a good friend

Tuyet, a Kinh girl in seventh grade, recalled the dropping-out of H'Roi students at the end of primary school. She described, in a disapproving tone, the difficulty a H'Roi classmate, H'Vy, had in learning:

When [H'Vy] opened a book she could not read a word. The teacher gave her a very short poem and asked her to memorise it. Two weeks later she could not recite it! The teacher did not punish her; she would have done so immediately if it had been one of us [Kinh pupils]. Her maths was terrible, too. She had to use her fingers and could not count in her head. She had only one set of uniform clothes and the white shirt turned yellowish. They [H'Roi classmates] say they bathe every day, but I don't know why they are kind of dirty. (Truong 2010a)

There used to be a H'Roi girl *Tuyet* described as her close friend, who dropped out of school and got married. *Tuyet* giggled as she talked about the good times she spent with H'Nga. But she appeared uneasy recalling that she only learned of Nga's wedding from their teacher's announcement. *Tuyet* sounded rather sad in this conversation:

Researcher: Did you go to her wedding?

Tuyet: Nope, she didn't invite me! But I knew she left for her husband's house on the 22nd of November.

Researcher: Do you know where she lives?

Tuyet: Friends from the village said she was married to a nurse working in a new settlement.

Researcher: Have you been in touch since?

Tuyet: No, I've never seen her again. Don't even know where she is. The other day I saw her younger sister at school; I asked what Nga was doing now. [Her sister] said she wasn't doing anything. [I] asked if she had a child; [she] said not yet. She looked like her sister a lot...

Tuyet's accounts of her H'Roi classmates can readily be seen along the line between the generalised Other, i.e., a poorly performing classmate, and the concrete Other, i.e., a close friend. What is interesting in this particular case is the relationship Tuyet appears to assume with each set of her Other. Tuyet reported that Vy was a poorly performing student whom she was assigned by the teacher to help. Apparently this unequal relation underscores Tuyet's pejorative comment on Vy's ability. This disapproval was followed by a generalised statement about the teacher's different handling of students from different ethnic groups. Commenting on the teacher's affirmative action, Tuyet also made a statement about the superiority of her learning ability and, by switching to the plural term 'us', she included that of other Kinh students. Tuyet's criticism seemed to extend to negative observations of the untidiness of her H'Roi classmates.

On the other hand, the balance of power shifted remarkably when it came to what happened between Tuyet and Nga. Tuyet did not hide her disappointment. She gave no explanation for Nga's withdrawal into silence, nor did she try to make sense of the distance that probably developed between them. Nevertheless, Tuyet's continued interest in and desire to see her friend is evinced in her small talk with Nga's sister and her sad tone in the conversation. In this friendship that seemed to turn into a seemingly one-sided interest, Tuyet appeared incapable of narrowing the emotional gap between herself and her friend. Tuyet's contrasting attitudes toward her H'Roi peers must, therefore, be understood in their specific social relations. It follows that if a researcher fails to see Tuyet as a concrete individual with a concrete her-story of friendship, she would fail to account for Tuyet's complex understanding of her ethnic minority counterparts.

Differences and markers of difference, however, seem to be of more interest to researchers concerned with ethnicity than to their informants and at the expense of sameness or similarities. Children, as demonstrated in the group discussion below, tend to see more commonality in human qualities between themselves and their ethnic counterparts. Only after the researchers insisted did the children articulate the differences between them.

Drawing the differences, talking of sameness

Seven H'Roi girls were grouped into two teams and assigned to draw and describe an imaginary best friend. The outcomes are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Portraits of 'My best friend'



On the left is Lan Anh, a Kinh girl. She is wearing a version of the traditional northern Kinh tunic, with a high neckline, layers of colourful fabric, and a loose tie-belt. The outfit is completed with a pair of shoes with small heels and hair styled in bunches. Lan Anh has a full figure, with a slightly chubby waist and round hips. She looks content; and her posture with lifted arms and apparently moving hips suggests a hint of playfulness.

On the right is H'Nhat, a H'Roi girl. The word 'nhat' in local Vietnamese, means 'shy'. Nhat's outfit – a plain, light turquoise V-neck blouse and matching trousers made from soft fabric – looks much more modest than that of Lan Anh. The dark blue pattern at the neckline does not say much about Nhat's ethnicity. Her flat shoes and casual mid-length hairstyle complete her modest look. With arms hanging down and one leg slightly bent, she looks as if she is hesitating between standing up straight and stepping away. Although her posture appears reserved, Nhat looks particularly rosy-cheeked and friendly, with a charming smile.

The written descriptions accompanying each portrait read as follow:

Lan Anh is

- funny.
- She loves her friends and likes to share everything, joy or sadness.
- She is cheerful. If I haven't got a bike to go to school, she takes me on her bike.
- She likes to sing and dance. She sings very well.
- She is very diligent in learning and often gets ten out of ten.

H'Nhat is

- kind-hearted.
- She cares about and helps her friends
- She has a kind smile.
- She has shoulder-length hair.
- She has gentle eyes.
- She is very good to her parents.
- She is very diligent at work.

The discussion that followed this exercise was particularly lively. Both teams were enthusiastic in highlighting the goodness of their characters. They came to agree that both Lan Anh and H'Nhat were good friends and shared many good qualities. When the researcher-facilitator pressed them, participants pointed out the differences between the two characters: locality and language. Lan Anh lives far from the village so she cannot join friends in bathing in the stream, and whenever they want to share something they have to speak to

her in Vietnamese. In the end, they agreed that 'among Kinh or the H'Roi, there are good people and bad people' and one 'would befriend good ones without any discrimination'.

It should be noted that the discussion was led in a way that aimed at bringing out differences. The facilitator asked the participants if Nhat could do things Lan Anh did and vice versa. The participants agreed that their activities as well as personal qualities were interchangeable. The two main differences, locality and language, were only brought out with the insistence and prompting from the researcher. It would be misleading to present the outcome of this activity as an authentic perspective of H'Roi children in Ea Mua. Instead, it was co-produced by both parties involved in the research. It is nonetheless safe to say that this exercise testifies to the ability of children to switch between the knowledge of the Other as concrete and the knowledge of the Other as generalised. Fictional as both characters of Lan Anh and H'Nhat were, they were built on children's concrete understanding of the specific material conditions of their life such as having a bicycle, going to school, working in the field, bathing in the stream, etc. The final statement, quoted above, demonstrates an ability to generalise the reversibility between ethnic groups, although the speaker arrived at this with guidance from the researcher-facilitator.

The three vignettes presented in this section are taken from different contexts, ranging from an almost natural conversation to an interview and a group activity. To varying degrees, all the narratives contain contradictions and ambiguity that are, in my reading, underpinned by speakers' knowledge of the Other as both concrete and generalised. This knowledge, in my view, can only be fully understood when researchers take into account the children they study as concrete individuals with a particular history and social relations with their peers. In the meantime, I have begun to show how specific discursive conditions and power relations – those between the researcher and the researched and among children themselves – give form to children's particular understanding of belongingness to an ethnic group. This theme is pursued further in the following section when I present non-verbal interactions between researchers and children as a way to test the usefulness of Butler's conception of performativity and Ortner's of agency in understanding the construction of children's identities.

4.2 Children's agency in performativity of identities

Hau and Loc, two male researchers in the team, faced a similar reluctance from the children with whom they worked whenever the conversations were about schooling. Cuong, a H'Roi boy, was uneasy when Hau asked about his education, before he reluctantly disclosed that he had failed exams in seven subjects in the last school year. Vu, a Hmong boy who dropped out of school two years ago, consistently looked away and gave Loc two words, 'don't know', every time school was mentioned. But when it came to outdoor activities, both boys showed a very different mood. Hau describes a fishing trip he went on with Cuong as follows:

Cuong started by digging for earthworms in the garden. I asked, 'How do you know where to dig?' He said, 'Of course I know. Wherever you see worm waste, they must be there.' ... Once we got the bait,... we walked to the stream. The water wasn't running very fast. Cuong put the rod into the water and said 'It's deep' (meaning there could be fish). I asked how he would know where it was deep. He said, 'Of course I know. Whichever area has dark colour, must be deep.' I asked, 'Who told you that?' He said, 'I just know.'

... We were waiting for a while. The sky was blue and calm. There was a very thin dark cloud at the rear of the horizon that only keen eyes would see. Cuong said, 'There will be flooding soon!' Surprised, I asked why. Cuong pointed to the horizon, 'Don't you see?'

There will be heavy rain over there soon.' 'It's rain over there, not here,' I objected. He smiled, 'If it rains upstream, the water will flood down here.' I was amazed; he talked just like an adult.

Loc's field notes of a cattle-tending trip with Vu and his friends read:

Today Vu and his friends took me to the buffalo-grazing land up in the mountain. Six boys aged from 8 to 15 were to tend six buffaloes. ... The boys swiftly climbed from one cliff to another. Once they reached a mid-range plateau, they left the buffaloes to graze and went on to the mossy rocks and little ponds. The crystal-clear water soothed my eyes and brought me an indescribable calm, but the mischievous boys threw rocks to make splashes and laughed together. They then kept climbing up to the mountain top. The cliffs were almost vertical; the boys only used their short knives to carve a tiny dent for their bare toes, and then lifted their bodies by their arms as their hands held tightly on to a rock above. They climbed up as swiftly as cats. I wonder if it is because of their survival skills in the rocky mountains that the lowlanders call them 'cat' [*Meo*] people. I myself was so scared of the boys' climbing. But I had no other way but to follow them.

... The boys played a couple of games. They argued and laughed freely, all in Hmong; I could not understand. There was a game they called 'chess,' which was different from the chess game I knew. They used a knife to draw a 'chessboard' of four squares on a bed of rock. For one side, pieces of rock were used for the 'chessmen', and dry tree branches for the other side. Vu seemed to excel in this type of chess. In fact, he won against his playmates in no time.

As the research initially focused on education of ethnic minority children, both researchers made schooling the priority of their inquiry early on in the fieldwork. Interactions on this topic resulted in considerable reservation on the part of child participants. Subsequent interactions such as fishing and cattle-tending trips can be seen as responses to the earlier negative experiences. Cuong and Vu, together with their siblings and friends, seemed to want to show the researchers an alternative kind of being clever. Through games and activities of their choice, they demonstrated their creativity, self-confidence and competitiveness. The discursive conditions and power relations changed significantly between episodes. In interviews about schooling, these boys were subjects of inquiry and put under the scrutiny of a strange researcher. When it came to outdoor activities, they were the ones who took the lead, and to some extent, controlled the game. The researcher assumed a learner's role and was occasionally surprised by abilities and confidence they might or might not have anticipated in the children whom they studied.

Unlike boys who found ways to demonstrate their skills in relation to nature in outdoor activities, girls tended to exhibit their other skills in household chores and caring for younger siblings. Thanh is the third daughter in a six-child Hmong family. In our conversations, assisted by translation by the eldest sister, Thanh appeared shy and reserved. Instead of pushing for her to talk, I opted to make quiet but open observations of her daily chores. My fieldnotes read:

In the daytime when the two elder sisters were away, probably working in the field or helping out with cooking at some neighbours' place in this ritual season, Thanh stayed at home looking after her youngest sibling, a 15-month-old boy. Thanh would feed him, entertain him, clean him, change his clothes, and put him to bed. Every time he was upset and cried, only Thanh could calm him. She was like his little mother.

... On the day before the last day [of my stay], I took out the camera to take pictures of the house. ... At other times when I took pictures of Thanh and her siblings, she always stood at the back, as if she wanted to be outside the frame. This time it was different. She placed a mat on the ground under a pomelo tree and started playing with her brother with a ball made of a young fruit. They had great fun, and Thanh appeared especially pleased having her picture taken this way.

My interaction with Thanh as recorded here was perhaps the most theatrical and openly intentional on Thanh's part. A full understanding of Thanh's actions necessitates a contextualisation of power differentials among the sisters. Thanh's two elder sisters had reached the age at which they could legally engage in full-time work, as well as get married. Each of them had a comparative advantage: one was especially sociable; the other was good at embroidery. Compared to her sisters, Thanh's status was less well defined. Her body had not shown signs of puberty. Even though her daily tasks of cattle tending, gardening, cooking and caring for younger siblings were as demanding and time-consuming as those of her sisters, they were not seen to be as serious. During my stay I eventually learned that caring for the youngest brother was what set Thanh apart. This marker of difference of Thanh's identity was also acknowledged by her parents and elder sisters in favourable terms.

By the time photographs were to be taken, Thanh had become accustomed to my quiet observation. Many times I had seen her playing with her brother in the courtyard, always without a mat. For me and probably also for Thanh, the mat was a metaphorical stage of her performance of sister-caregiver identity, a performance she knew would be recorded and stored elsewhere. Because of the presence of a recording device, the camera, Thanh's performance of sisterly care was clearly staged with her own intention.

The aforementioned interpretation is solely mine. We have no way of confirming with the children studied during this research that that was their conscious intention. Nevertheless, through their actions, they seemed to make a statement, or give a message, about themselves as just being themselves. In the case of Cuong and Vu, their actions can be seen as response to the researchers' implicit questioning of the comparative learning ability of children from different ethnic groups. They helped illuminate for the Kinh researchers the aspects of Hmong or H'Roi childhood that the children seemed to think the researchers might not know. In the case of Thanh, her performance of sisterly identity seemed to aim to correct what she thought was my impression of her worth, in comparison with her two elder sisters. If the researchers' understanding, which was shaped by the local discourse on children's identities, can be seen as a discursive condition, the interactions reported in this section have demonstrated children's 'ability to engage in novel actions and to modify [this particular] social condition', and thereby, confirmed their critical capacity (Fraser 1995: 66; Truong 2011). Therefore children's agency, in my reading, is materialised not through their choice of reiteration, or repetition, of the discourse 'that produces that which it names' (Butler 1993:13), but through enactment of their intention, conscious or unconscious, to convey a message of their own (Ortner 2006).

I have tried thus far to bring out the implications of combining the comparative strengths of discourse analysis, social-cultural constructionism and anthropological perspectives on agency of intention. I hope I have demonstrated that children's identities are constituted through a discursive and non-discursive practice that is in turn shaped by particular social conditions and power relations involving children and their others, be that the children of other ethnic groups, the adults in their locality, or the Kinh adult researchers. Children's ability to formulate and enact their agency is best seen in their interactions with researchers under the effects of the local discourse. In as much as researchers must take into account children

as concrete individuals, they must also be aware that they themselves are also concrete individuals with their own particular history and identities. I will now discuss the importance of researchers recognising these concrete selves in order to fully account for the negotiation of ethnographic accounts of children's experience.

4.3 Negotiating ethnographic accounts of children's experience

Critical self-reflection on the role of the researcher in knowledge production in ethnography has become a commonplace in anthropology for the last quarter of a century (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In studies of children and childhood, this critique has taken varying forms, ranging from the reflection of a mother (James 1993; Morton 1996) or a constructivist acknowledgement of the power differentials between the researcher and the researched (Mayall 2000), to the critical reflection of a white male adult researcher working with children of many ethnicities (Connolly 2006). Meanwhile, there have been efforts to challenge unequal power relations between the adult researcher and children/the researched by making children co-researchers (Alderson 2000). However, neither making children researchers nor an increased critical self-awareness of the effects of the researchers on knowledge production necessarily means a thorough resolution of the problem of representation. Methodological amendments in themselves do not guarantee the authenticity of the ethnography produced in the form of text. Moreover, as Komulainen (2007) has argued, children's voice is itself socially constructed, i.e., often mediated by adults' engagement not only in communication but also in interpretation of children's messages. Here I hope to turn this increased awareness of the socialness of children's daily life and the interaction between the researcher and the researched to good use in understanding the ways in which ethnographic accounts were negotiated.

The choice of excerpts of transcripts and field notes to be included in this paper was clearly driven by my intention to illustrate the points I wanted to make. I did not exclude, however, details that could be viewed by readers as flaws of the researchers. By including them I fully acknowledge that our team members, including myself, could not avoid commonsensical responses and reactions to a daily situation. Hau could not resist making remarks such as 'he talked just like an adult' and Loc recalled the pejorative term the Kinh respondent used to refer to Hmong ('cat people') as he witnessed the boys' rock-climbing skills.⁶ The point worth emphasising here is that we were aware of the biases, both individual and professional, that affected our particular ways of making our inquiry. The activities in which the boys engaged the researchers served as corrections to the researchers' pre-conceived ideas of H'roi and Hmong childhood shaped by their own childhood experiences.

The negotiation of ethnographic accounts of children's experience does not occur only at a dialogical level of actions involving children and researchers. At times children took immediate action to make direct alterations of the accounts to be recorded according to their preference. The clearest examples often had to do with the use of the camera, as seen in Thanh's staged scene. Some children would tell the researcher not to take a picture of a particular scene they thought inappropriate or simply not to their taste. Boys and girls alike disliked having pictures taken of them in working clothes or while doing manual tasks. Some would edit details of what was to be included in the picture, for instance, remove a lightly torn conical hat and borrow the researcher's umbrella instead.

6 *Meo* is an ethnonym of the Hmong people that is used by the Kinh or the lowland ethnic groups with pejorative connotations. For an extended discussion on the Hmong ethnonyms and their implications, see Duong 2006 and Nguyen Van Thang 2007.

Corrections were made by children and their parents collectively if they seemed to be triggered by a biased judgment on the researcher's part. At one point, I was surprised to learn that Thanh had only been to the marketplace once. I had been told that Hmong girls in the area would frequent marketplaces from the age of 13 or 14 to take part in courtship. My unconcealed surprise made Thanh and her sister uneasy. A couple of days later, I was told that Thanh would join her sister to go to the marketplace the following week. Their father and mother, each on a separate occasion, also made the same announcement to me, as if it was something they had arranged this partly for me to observe. In a household with two unmarried elder sisters, Thanh's going to the marketplace was apparently not a priority. Thanh's marketplace visit, which might otherwise not have occurred, can be seen as a response to the discourse shaped by the conjuncture between local knowledge and the researcher's expectation of a generalised Other.

Negotiation for identities was also done indirectly but motivated by children's initiatives. A girl told her mother to make a correction in an earlier interview: one of the three cows she tended actually belonged to her family. Her mother added, 'Poor girl, she was afraid that Ms Chi would think she lied. I consoled her by saying, "Don't worry, I'll tell her and she'll understand. It's okay to tell Ms Chi we own a cow."' Both the mother and the girl were probably responding to the pressure from the discourse on poverty and ethnic minorities that governed the distribution of government aid in their locality. Despite my efforts to clarify the distinction between an academic study and a baseline survey for an aid programme, my informants probably feared that disclosure of their owning such an asset as a cow would affect their poor-household status that qualified them for special government aid. The girl's initiative in making corrections to my ethnographic accounts was not driven primarily by an intention for self-assertion. It was instead an outcome of a broader unequal power structure in which her family was subsumed. The mother's utterance, 'It's okay to tell Ms Chi we own a cow,' was indeed a reiteration of a discourse that produced their poverty/ethnic minority identity.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored a number of cross-cutting discursive fields underpinned by different power structures – the power differentials between ethnic majority and minority, the researcher and the researched, between children and their family members, and among the children themselves. I tend to lean toward Butler's insistence on the importance of uncovering how discourse and power relations constitute identity and subjectivity (Butler 1995). Meanwhile, I have found it is wise to follow Fraser's advice not to pursue the unproductive trace for a point of origin of the self (Fraser 1995: 67). I have instead focused my interests on the present working of agency. To this end, I have tried in this paper to demonstrate the value of an approach that combines discursive analysis and anthropological conception of agency. The vignettes offered in this paper testify to children's critical capacities. They also demonstrate that children's identities are culturally constructed through their own engagement in discursive and non-discursive practice. I hope the stories reported here have drawn attention to the diverse experience of individual children with their own 'concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution' (Benhabib 1992: 159) as well as 'intentions, fears, desires, projects' (Ortner 2006: 61).

Finally, I hope I have joined in the efforts to address the problem of representation in studies of children and childhood. By laying bare the internal dynamics in some ethnographic

situations and the effects researcher–researched interactions might have on the production of ethnographic accounts, I believe I have demonstrated the fruitfulness of a critical self-reflective approach on the researchers' part. The paper has demonstrated the usefulness of distinguishing between the concepts of the generalised and the concrete Other, not only in understanding children's varying knowledge of their peers of different ethnic groups but also in taking account of researchers' differential knowledge of the researched Other. Only through engaging with the internal politics of the researched community and recognising a continuous negotiation between the researcher and the researched can one keep the risk of 'ethnographic refusal' at bay and work toward a rich body of ethnographies that genuinely account for children's experience.

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