Teaching Anthropology

RAI

2012, Vol.2, No.2, pp. 15-26

# The *Global Girls Project*: A Case Study of Ethics and Education in the Field

Heidi Hoefinger, PhD
Institute of South East Asian Affairs, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

**Abstract:**
This paper highlights the political and ethical challenges of projects that combine research, advocacy and pedagogy. These challenges are illustrated through the lens of the *Global Girls: Autobiography and E-Literacy* project, which took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2008. Within Phnom Penh, there is a population of young women who work in bars, with the aim of forming transactional relationships with foreign men. They barter physical and emotional intimacy and friendship in exchange for various material and emotional benefits. They utilize many skills in order to maintain these relationships, including spoken and written English proficiency, and computer skills such as emailing and communication technology. The goal of the *Global Girls* Project was to harness those same skills to create a collaborative action-based educational research project focused on autobiography. The aim was to assist the women in improving their spoken and written English skills, grammar, typing, word processing and Internet skills, and in writing about personal history, family, self, future ambitions and career goals. The project aimed to create a space where women could network with one another, participate in dialogue about their experiences and lives, engage in collective action and solidarity, and build cross-sector friendships. This paper describes the practical details of the project, including its outcomes and limitations, as well as highlights some of the debates around action-based research and advocacy in anthropology. It also addresses the ethical and theoretical implications of becoming involved in education in field research settings, as well as the role of education as an ethnographic research tool, and the ways it can enhance and challenge the relationship between the anthropologist, participants, and communities in the field.

## Introduction

"No talk, no money" stated Rattana matter-of-factly, as she smiled and poured a beer from her position behind the bar.[1] "Yeah," her friend and co-worker, Tina, chimed in, "you need English to get drinks and money from customers and boyfriends." Both women were employed in a well-known hostess bar in Phnom Penh, the capital city Cambodia.[2] They proceeded to explain how essential English linguistic ability was in terms of meeting and talking to men, soliciting 'ladies' drinks[3], earning money and gifts, and maintaining potential long-term transnational relationships. The more the women are able to forge bonds with foreign customers and boyfriends using their English communication skills (both oral and written), the more they increase their chances of gaining benefits, opportunities and economic advancements. Those advancements then augment their ability to consume products and services, which in turn enhances self-esteem, self-image, and confidence. This new consumer status and confidence is conveyed to others through material possessions, attitudes, behaviours, and actions, and the women are then able to advance their standing both within their families and in the broader society.

For young women employed in the hospitality, tourism and entertainment sectors, English linguistic ability is thus a fundamental catalyst for empowerment and upward mobility. Without it, options for increasing one's status within those sectors (and beyond) remain limited. The type of frank pragmatism evidenced by Rattana and Tina is particularly common among "professional girlfriends" (PGs), or those women who engage in multiple

overlapping sexual/non-sexual "transactional" relationships with "western" boyfriends via a performance of intimacy in order to support their livelihoods and secure their futures.[4] Crucial to maintaining those long-term partnerships is also the ability to use the Internet and other communication technology, which can increase the chances of having money and goods sent from abroad, of return visits from the men, or even of eventual marriage proposals.

Whether the women identify as "bar girls," "professional girlfriends," "taxi girls," or all three (as identities are multiple and shifting, and some women move fluidly between the categories[5]), preliminary research that took place during my anthropology Master's degree fieldwork in 2005 revealed an overarching desire to improve their linguistic and technological skills, and it was this desire, along with an ethical commitment to advocacy in the field, that spurred my ideas for the *Global Girls: Autobiography and E-Literacy Project* which took place in 2008 during my PhD fieldwork. The goal of the e-literacy project was to harness their basic communication and IT skills to create a collaborative project where women used and improved their spoken and written English skills, grammar, typing, word processing and Internet skills in a more self-reflexive way (in addition to the "bar" and "relationship" vocabulary they already possessed). The project included free English and computer classes for women employed in the hospitality and entertainment sectors, and resulted in some interesting outcomes, which will be discussed below.

This paper highlights the ethical implications of becoming involved in education in field research settings, however, this paper also highlights some of the debates around advocacy and action-based research within anthropology, while paying attention to the role of education as an ethnographic research tool, and the ways it can challenge and enhance the relationship between the anthropologist, participants, and communities in the field. Before delving into this particular research terrain, however, some background information is necessary.

## Background and Field Setting

I first entered the "contact zone" (Pratt 1986) in 2003 as one of the plethora of backpackers dotting in and out of the city. It was then that I casually met some of the young women who were to become key informants and friends throughout the formalized research trajectory, which would see me through conversations and interviews with nearly 300 people in a variety of hostess bars, backpacker guesthouses, sex bars, dance clubs, western-style pubs, restaurants, Khmer karaoke venues and beer gardens. During those first informal encounters in 2003 (and in later official field visits for a Master's degree in 2005 and a PhD in 2008, which will be outlined below), I was viewed by the young women as a peer and friend. We shared similar identifying factors such as age, gender, and style of dress, as well as many of the same interests in nightlife, dancing, drinking and meeting new people. As there is a pronounced sense of familiarity and solidarity among Khmer women of the same generation, the young women quickly accepted me into their friendship networks, and referred to me as *bong srei*, or older sister (an oft-used term which reflected my status of being just a few years older than many of them).

In some of her recent work, Angela McRobbie (2007, 2009) offers a dynamic post-feminist critique of consumer and popular culture which is useful when discussing these shared modes of contemporary feminine citizenship. She explains that in the "production of commercial femininities in the developing world" (McRobbie 2009: 59), we find the emergence of the "global girl," who is "emblematic of the power and success of corporate multi-culturalism" and "enthusiastic about membership of and belonging to, a kind of global femininity" (McRobbie 2009: 88). Influenced by the liberal feminist model, global commercial media and the sweeping fashion-beauty complex, she argues that many of these young women actively appropriate products associated with western femininity and sexuality into their own cultures of consumption (and this includes alcohol and communication technology). The result is the emergence of similar yet culturally differentiated "modern" global girls—a label that, I argue, both my informants and myself share (and, therefore, an appropriate title for the action research project).

Our commonality as "global girls" was by no means what Daphne Patai (1991) refers to as a "facile assumption" or "fraud" based on material inequalities and differences in class, race and ethnicity. While we did come from unique positionalities and differentiated experiences, the women and I were from the same "generation" despite

the few years that separated us, and thus we shared similar material interests, but also life goals that crossed boundaries of class and race. We formed a very real material or even generational solidarity—as opposed to a "purported solidarity" (Patai 1991)—that was relevant and fulfilling for us in a variety of ways.[6]

We maintained those initial friendships from 2003, and I returned in 2005 to conduct formal academic research on the sex and entertainment sectors for a Master's degree in Anthropology. It was during that period of intensive immersion and "intimate ethnography"[7] of bar girl subculture that the importance of linguistic ability became abundantly clear. Exposed to both global media and fashion styles, and the enormous influx of foreigners to tourist areas of the city, the taste for consumerism was expanding among global girls. In order to support their consumption practices and maintain the spending capacity necessary to get their hair and nails done every day, for example, some women supplemented their bar incomes (which averaged USD$60-$100 per month) by developing relationships with those foreign men, who had access to more money and power than Cambodians by their mere position as westerners.

Through the use of strong interpersonal skills, the women hoped to form long-lasting links, and verbal communication in a common language was the most essential element of initiating and maintaining those links. As English has superseded the colonial language of French in general usage and popularity among local Cambodians and foreigners alike, it was crucial for professional girlfriends and other bar workers to be proficient in that particular language. Many women were spending $6-$15 per month for English classes, which was 10-15 per cent of their monthly salaries.

In addition to economically empowering these women, however, proficiency in speaking English was vital to manoeuvring matters of health and safety. Empowerment vis-à-vis linguistic aptitude was also evidenced through the women's increased ability to negotiate condom-use, discuss sexual activities they would or would not engage in, question partners about sexual histories and general health, and navigate through precarious situations with customers and boyfriends.[8] A diminished (or non-existent) ability to communicate verbally in certain intimate encounters could result in detrimental outcomes for all parties involved. In transnational meeting grounds such as Phnom Penh, English proved to be an invaluable tool for those involved the intimate minglings of sex, love and money.

## Education as Advocacy: Debates in Anthropology

Between my Master's degree research (2005) and PhD fieldwork (2008), I was greatly influenced by the postcolonial literature of Edward Said (1978, 1985, 1993), Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1993, 1999, 2004), Judith Stacey (1991), Daphne Patai (1991), Mary Louise Pratt (1992), and Chandra Mohanty (2003). Questions were surfacing around positionality, power, and reciprocity. Uncomfortable with the thought of myself as an "Orientalist" who was potentially "dominating, restructuring, and having authority" over young Cambodian women (Said 1978: 3), I was forced to confront these postcolonial quandaries and contemplate new forms of more reciprocal and egalitarian anthropological research.

Early on, Ann Oakley argued for "no intimacy without reciprocity" (1981: 49)—a statement which encourages anthropologists to engage in more give-and-take modes of interaction, which can thus lead to a potential "balancing out" of terrain between researcher and researched. This feminist interpersonal approach is attentive to empathy, connection and concern for human agency and everyday realities, which was in line with my ideas around "intimate ethnography." However, I felt a need to use methods other than interviewing and "intimate" participant observation to create a more ethical research practice that combined my academic thinking with a more community activism approach—in a form of what Alexander Ervin (2000) refers to as "praxis anthropology." Related to the work of Bourdieu (1977), this type of anthropology attempts to "bridge the gap between theory and applied anthropology" (Ervin 2000:9, referenced in Kellett 2009:23).

I view(ed) knowledge sharing and education in the field as a form of advocacy, and one that would be not only beneficial, but vital in the case of my work with young women in Cambodia. However, within anthropology, scholars are divided on the issue of advocacy, arguing for detachment or neutrality on one side, and for necessary political engagement on the other.

For some academics, all anthropology is, or should be, a form of advocacy. In a debate on advocacy in anthropology (see Wade 1996), Robert Layton contended that, "Advocacy means supporting or pleading for

another…both are, to different degrees, imperative for the proper practice of anthropology" (Layton 1996: 11). He continues, "Advocacy derives naturally from the practice of anthropology… it's an integral part of the process of representing other people's views" (Layton 1996:36). Along similar lines, Merill Singer claims, "All of anthropology is advocacy, because all activity is goal-oriented and has consequence in social life" (Singer 1990:548, cited in Kellett 2009: 25).

Due to "continuing global inequalities and injustices between north and south, as well as between the rich and powerful and the poor and dispossessed" (Kellett 2009: 23), "activist" anthropologists argue for a radical approach to anthropology which must be politically committed and ethically engaged in the social worlds of the people we study. Pierre Bourdieu explains that, "for reasons no doubt relating to my own person and to the state of the world, I have come to believe that those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake" (2003:11). Beverley Skeggs warns against "abstract theorizing which does not have any political imperative" (1995: 199) and in reference to the extreme poverty and social injustice she witnessed throughout her research, Nancy Scheper-Hughes frankly asks: "What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and political) stand on events we are privileged to witness?"(1995:411).

For those on the pro-advocacy side of the debate, this type of ethical and political engagement is imperative. However, there are other scholars who maintain that activism can jeopardize neutrality and can cause divisions and conflicting interests in the field. Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Elsass (1990) argue that anthropological advocacy is a "contradiction in terms" because "anthropology is about revealing diverse viewpoints, whereas advocacy is about choosing and defending only one viewpoint" (Wade 1996:5). Peter Wade continues: "Any form of political engagement is, by its very nature, contestable and arguable. Advocacy, as one particular mode of engagement or reflexive academic practice, shares this nature. A host of problems arises related to the specific interests being advocated, the divided interests within any 'community' on behalf of which one might be speaking, the difficulty of siding oneself with [one] group of people..." (1996: 4).

The argument here is that "successful advocacy on behalf of one oppressed group may, for example, allow its members to exploit another group" (Fuller 1996: 6). While there was a risk that a project developed around women's literacy could lead to accusations that I was "taking sides"[9], the gendered constraints and double standards are so acute, I felt ethically obligated as a postcolonial feminist anthropologist to advocate on the women's behalves.

Rather than going to Cambodia as a "First World," middle class, white researcher to simply record the plight of the "Third World Woman" (Mohanty 2003), I wanted to use myself as a research tool in an attempt to create a dialogic project that aimed to help empower women—but not "rescue" them—by encouraging them to improve the communication skills they already possessed, and to also strengthen existing network bonds while nurturing new ones. Fully aware that attempting such a project presented methodological questions not only regarding objectivity, but also the ever-looming dilemma that it could also be viewed as a reinscription of power asymmetries across gender, race, class and other forms of privilege (Lincoln and Cannella 2008, Spivak 1999, 2004)[10], I decided the benefits would outweigh the negatives, and went ahead with the *Global Girls: Autobiography and E-literacy Project*. These benefits will be outlined below.

## The *Global Girls Project*

There is a complex political terrain around the sex and entertainment sectors in which this project was embedded in Cambodia. Though the country prides itself as being morally and sexually conservative, I would paradoxically argue that "sex" is a highly prevalent metanarrative in the city centres, where its visibility, its consumption, and effects are evidenced in multiple layers of everyday life. While sex is undoubtedly becoming more mainstreamed and commercialized (principally among young people), there is also a shadowy underbelly of the sexual landscape, however, which involves gang rape, incest, sexual exploitation of children, and "human trafficking" and smuggling for sexual purposes (see Hoefinger 2013).

A reaction by both Cambodians and the global north to these physical and sexual abuses has been the development of a "rescue industry" (Agustín 2007), whereby many NGOs make it their business to "rescue" victims of abuse in a framework similar to that of the colonial project, whereby the growing middle-class in

Europe saw themselves as "peculiarly suited to help, control, advise and discipline the unruly poor, including their sexual conduct" (Agustín 2007: 7). For many of these predominantly Christian-based organizations[11] in Cambodia today, all types of commercial sexual exchange are considered exploitative and oppressive, and the women involved are viewed as manipulated, vulnerable, powerless victims that need rescuing or saving. These organizations conflate all consensual sex work with "human trafficking," and aim towards "abolishing" all forms of "modern day sexual slavery." For this reason, these particular groups are referred to as the "abolitionists."

On the other side of the NGO debate around sex, sex work and women are those with the worker/human rights-based approaches. These organizations acknowledge that selling/exchanging one's sexual services is a form of labour that some women *do* decide to engage in, and they promote a rights-based, holistic understanding and analysis of this type of work, as well as more harm-reductionist approach in the establishment of their interventional programs.[12] It is from this perspective that I developed the *Global Girls: Autobiography and E-Literacy Project* in 2008. Rather than "rescuing" "helpless" bar girls, my goal was to create a space for networking, translation and information/knowledge sharing between peers who saw the ability to communicate as a fundamental tool to not only work in safer conditions, but to organize and socialize with each other. Through establishing such a space, I intended to facilitate empowerment and challenge the stigma associated with bar or sex work—not by "saving," but by collective action and solidarity.

It was intended for the project to be a space where the girls could participate in dialogues about their experiences, build cross-sector friendships, increase self-esteem and pride, increase agency and voice, and increase intellectual expression and action. So as to motivate and inspire self-reflexivity, the topics of the project focused on autobiography. The girls were encouraged to think about their childhoods and families, their feelings, past experiences, future ambitions and career goals.

The project was aimed at any young women employed in the hospitality, tourism and entertainment sectors (or simply those who hung out in bars with the intention of meeting foreign boyfriends, and therefore included sex workers, professional girlfriends and non sex workers). Recruitment was carried out mainly in bars, restaurants and clubs in tourist areas of city through the use of a flyer advertising "Free English and Computer Classes: For Girls Who Work in Bars, Restaurants & Hotels." The goal was to keep the language and concepts on the flyer simple and easy to understand, with an emphasis on the "free" nature of what was being offered. While handing out the flyers, I verbally explained to the women that the project was more of a "skills-sharing" rather than a formal "NGO-style" project. This was done so that I was not viewed with suspicious as another white NGO worker trying to "rescue" them from the bars. Such interventions are not uncommon in Cambodia (particularly among Christian-based NGOs), and discussions with many women revealed that these interventions are not always welcome. Aside from flyering, recruitment also took place through "snowballing"—i.e., through word of mouth and within their friendship networks. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Department of Media and Communications Research Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths College, University of London. All participants provided their oral informed consent before participating in their first class.

The sessions took place once a week for two hours, on Wednesdays from 12-2pm, so as to try and accommodate those who worked late the night before and those who had to start work by 3pm. The classes were held in split locations, with the first half of the English/grammar/speaking/writing session taking place in a residential space in the back area of the building I was staying in, which had its own entrance, a couch and a few chairs. The second half of the computer sessions took place across the street in an Internet cafe. There was no funding for the project, aside from the privately donated $100 for supplies, so while I thought of holding the classes in university labs, they were far too expensive. Therefore, the split locations were the most economical "grassroots" way of facilitating the sessions.

In order to create the initial lesson plans, which focused on bodies, families and feelings, respectively, I drew on various literacy resources (e.g. Klippel 1984, Ford 1997, Finn 2000, EBL Coaching 2004), as well as my own previous teaching experience. In 2001, I already held a Bachelor's Degree of Science in Education (with a concentration in Special Education and a minor in Anthropology) and had already spent several years abroad, teaching English and other subjects in countries such as Mexico, India, and Japan. While based in New York and London, I also taught elementary/primary education and high school (special) education prior to my career in higher education. Therefore, I felt highly qualified to teach EFL and computer literacy in a diverse and multi-cultural environment, to students with varying educational levels and backgrounds.

In the days building up to the start of the classes in Phnom Penh, there was a good deal of excitement, enthusiasm and interest among the women. Some girls seemed overjoyed at the opportunity and expressed their gratitude and excitement. However, when the day came for the first session, only three adult women showed up: two tailoring students who worked as cleaners in hotels, and a direct sex worker named Sochua, (who was accompanied by her three-and-a-half year old daughter). Although the numbers of participants were low, we had a productive session. Having had no formal schooling at all, it was the first time Sochua had attended a semi-formal "lesson" in her entire life, which pleased her tremendously. Her daughter also participated in the English part of the session and acquainted herself with a computer for the first time.[13]

Wary of the power implications of "me as teacher" and "them as students," I tried to maintain a role as merely "facilitator." As Spivak points out, "The task of the educator is to learn to learn from below… giving up convictions of triumphalist superiority" (2004: 551). The project was, therefore, not only a free venue for the girls to practice and improve their skills (when, as stated above, many paid to attend such classes), but an opportunity to collectively discuss how the sessions would run, what topics they wanted to address, what they wanted to create, and why it was important to them.

As sessions rolled on, there was a lot of talk about the project amongst the girls, particularly out in the bars. Many young women were inquiring about how it was going. The most distressing problem was low attendance. When it came to Wednesday at midday, only 2-4 women would trickle in. We were all enjoying the small groups because it felt as though we were accomplishing a great deal, as we worked intensely together at each girls' particular levels. However, the low numbers were somewhat discouraging.

## Positionality and Reflection

After the initial excitement, I couldn't quite understand the lack of attendance. I proceeded to systematically write down a long list of "possible" reasons, but also very "real" excuses I was receiving. These excuses included: being too tired; too busy with boyfriends and with shopping; too hungover; too busy watching TV; having family problems; not having money to get there; and too far to walk. I felt that possible reasons might have been that the split location in residential space and internet cafe wasn't formal or professional enough; maybe I would have had more attendees if it was held in university lab—but then again, that might be intimidating as well. Perhaps they didn't like how I pitched it as only "open to girls working in bars, restaurants, hotels, and other tourist places" because they felt stigmatized and separate from "other" girls who didn't work in these places. Maybe they were suspicious or didn't see the value in it because it was free, and they saw more value in the classes they already attended and paid for.

Tina, who revealed her pragmatism in the opening paragraph, alluded to the idea that she and her friends were already proficient enough and were happy with the practical language skills they learned from chatting in the bars.[14] Maybe others felt they wouldn't benefit from the sessions, and that they didn't need to use *Microsoft Word*, for example, for their future ambitions of marrying rich husbands or opening their own businesses. On the other hand, some of the girls who lacked literacy skills hinted that they felt intimidated by the idea of "classes" and that they "wouldn't be good enough" on the computers. It is interesting to note that the most consistent attendees were the two women already enrolled in tailoring school, who already had an interest in schooling. Perhaps the study "ethic" was different for women who have had little formal education, and that I prematurely assumed the "classroom-style learning environment" would translate effectively there.

This led me to contemplate the actual format of the sessions themselves. Sitting around in a circle and talking openly about oneself and one's experiences is quite a western concept of learning and information sharing; Cambodian women do the same thing, but just in context of the bars, beauty salons and communal living spaces. While there is very strong solidarity between female networks, they don't sit around writing '*zines*' and creating websites about it (which were some of the original objectives I had imagined). Perhaps I was inadvertently trying to import a very western model of feminism and education to a non-western environment, and this was why it wasn't going to plan.

Ultimately, however, I believe one of the primary conscious or subconscious reasons the women didn't attend the classroom sessions was because of ambiguity over my role as facilitator/teacher/friend. Culturally, "teachers are always 'bigger', of higher status, than their students" (Ledgerwood 1990: 318; see also Chandler 1984: 275-277) and Cambodians generally hold a certain respect for "authority" figures such as teachers. As mentioned

above, however, they viewed me, first and foremost as their western "counterpart" and one of their peers due to our first encounters in the bars, then as an advocate, and finally as a facilitator/teacher and researcher. Because I knew of their "deviant" behaviour in the bars at night—things that would most definitely be kept private from "respectable" teachers or elders, such as drinking, smoking and "sexy" dancing—and because I participated in some of these things myself, I believe they found it difficult to envisage me as facilitating learning sessions in a classroom-type environment.[15] This speaks to the complexities of juggling multiple roles and identities within intimate ethnography and methodological "explorations" such as these.[16]

The low attendance in the lessons was ultimately a combination of many different factors mentioned above. After engaging in continual participant member checks to gauge how the sessions were going from the perspective of the students, but also to get their opinions as to why their friends weren't attending, I then approached my field mentor for advice on how to reach a larger audience. She simply suggested: "Why don't you move the classes out of the classroom?" So that's what we did. After four "formal" classroom sessions, I adjusted the research plan and turned the project into more one-to-one and small group practical sharing and assistance for those who requested it. With this move, I was not only able to address the specific needs and wants of the women, but was also able to reach, and include, a much larger number of girls who weren't able to attend the actual classes, as I then assisted them in their homes, in bars, in Internet cafes, or locations of their choice.

Although we did not end up creating a website or publishing *a zine*, the individual outcomes were rewarding for both the women and myself. Sochua learned how to read, write and type her name and a few other phrases into a Word document, which she was then able to save and print. Although this might seem like a fairly minimal accomplishment, she felt it was a huge boost for her self-esteem and confidence to be able to improve her skills and engage with the technology. Her daughter learned how to write some letters of the alphabet and speak some words in English, and I assisted other women with writing résumés, filling out job applications, uploading photos, navigating around the web, buying plane tickets, using *Google Earth* to find out where their boyfriends lived, or setting up *MySpace, Facebook* and *Skype* accounts—which were all skills they greatly wanted to learn. Some of the girls typed self-reflexive and autobiographical paragraphs about their bodies and what they liked and disliked about them, and also paragraphs about different family members, which they printed and were very proud of. The women also explained how they shared their newly learned skills with their children, or other family members, who were greatly impressed by their linguistic and technological abilities.

Most importantly, however, there were many cross-sector and cross-class friendships that developed through the project. The tailoring students and hotel cleaners had become friends with sex workers and "bar girls." These new friendships came in particularly useful for each of the girls during certain crisis situations that they would later come to experience involving sexual and domestic violence and self-harming (see Hoefinger 2010 for details). More than the language or technology skills learned, these interpersonal connections led to the development of alternative forms of kinship (Butler 1993) which enabled and sustained the migratory women in the face of dislocation, poverty, insecurity and violence. This was perhaps the most important and beneficial outcome of all.

## "Transformative Egalitarianism"

From the above-presented debate around rescue industry, some critics may argue that by attempting this project, I was just another white "saviour" going over to Cambodia to "save" poor Asian women from prostitution, victimization and sexual exploitation. Or that even in these dialogic attempts I was merely reinscribing power differentials across race, class and other forms of privilege. My answer to these dilemmas of "rescue" and power is twofold. First of all, power asymmetries are present everywhere, in nearly every situation, be they gendered, racial, classist and between men, women, employers, employees, doctors, patients, professors, students, parents, children, etc. The best we can do is try to strike a balance and come up with creative strategies that might in some way level the playing field, or work in such a way that power shifts between people.

In the case of the *Global Girls Project*, I was continually aware of and examining power orientations between myself and participants. I tried to avoid the dilemma of me being the "big teacher" and them the "small students" by acting merely as facilitator in the sessions, which meant letting them take the lead in what they wanted to learn and get out of project. This resulted in changing my entire idea of holding classroom sessions, and how the project would run altogether, and instead catering to the specific needs and desires of each

individual woman. We each had to maintain a certain level of open-mindedness and flexibility and I would argue the project was a learning experience for all of us. Not only did they improve and learn new skills, but they helped me with Khmer, and shared their cultural knowledge with me, so that there was a mutually beneficial and useful exchange taking place. I was most certainly not trying to "rescue" or "save" these young women from the decisions they made. Nor was I discouraging them from continuing with their work, or their relationships. I viewed them as agents capable of creating their own change and carving out their own futures. Having new or improved skills would only empower them in this process.

Echoing in the words of Scheper-Hughes, I would also argue that in addition to practical benefits of language and cultural sharing, my "theoretical horizons were expanded" (1995: 410) as a result of the project. The intimacy that developed between myself and the women during the sessions was the means through which I became aware of myself as a positioned, partial and knowing self (Cesara 1982, Kulick 1995, Kulick and Wilson 1995, Irwin 2006). It led to a heightened awareness of my positionality as a western middle-class researcher/teacher/friend, and the historically-based biases inevitably connected to this subjectivity. I became more cognizant of my strengths and weaknesses, of our similarities and differences, and of the negotiations of power that inevitably occurred between us (Hoefinger 2013). Intimate familiarity through knowledge and cultural sharing sparked a creative energy in me (Newton 1993) and drove the rest of the fieldwork along. This advocacy-based approach through "mutual education" deepened my critical judgement and inspired reflexivity, which ultimately aided me in providing sophisticated accounts of the complex lived experience of participants, which, in turn, led to the creation of better anthropology.

Aside from all the circular debates around power, race, and class, education is a human right. To be educated is to be empowered. In a publication by the Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP) about women's rights in Cambodia, Nakagawa Kasumi writes: "Education is vital to personal and societal development and wellbeing. Education provides women with the power to reflect, to make choices, and to enjoy a better life. A mother's education has a strong impact on health, family and fertility…Women must have access to literacy and skills training in order significantly to improve their livelihoods, which can lead to the development of a country as a whole" (2006: 29). In a country where there are significantly lower numbers of females than males enrolled in lower and upper secondary schools (NIS 2005), if I can in any way contribute towards skills-sharing and education as a form of advocacy during my academic career, I feel it is my ethical responsibility as a researcher to do so—despite what colour I am or where I am from.

I am in favour of reconceptualizing research towards what Lincoln and Canella refer to as a "reflexive, critical social science ethics" which includes "a concern for transformative egalitarianism" and focuses on research that examines and challenges social systems, supports social justice and activism, and constructs a "nonviolent revolutionary ethical consciousness" (hooks 2000; Lincoln and Canella 2008: 7-9). Here, power relations are continually examined; sustained attention is paid to problems of representation; anticolonialism, egalitarianism, transparency and reflexivity are promoted; and action-based research is practiced.

## Conclusion: Education as an Ethnographic Research Tool

The above description and analysis of the *Global Girls Project* reveals that politically engaged advocacy and the utilization of education as a research tool is not only ethical, but "theoretically valid and practically advantageous" (Kellett 2009: 26). In the most pragmatic terms, education and skills sharing in the field was a means of promoting the empowerment of participants. The women honed and improved language and technological skills, which they would use both in and out of the bars, in their attempts to secure economic and social advancements, and navigate through precarious situations with boyfriends or clients. Tina, for example, used her CV-writing skills to land a job in a western-oriented boutique hotel, and her computer skills to eventually start her own small clothing trading business. Sochua gave the example of using her improved language skills to negotiate condom use with foreign customers whom she continued to meet in the bars.

These language and computer skills were also transferable and shared with other peers, children or family members in both biological and alternative kinship networks. The women were at once learners and educators, students and teachers, providers and receivers, mentors and mentees, and the sessions, themselves, were spaces for these "multiple identities" (Law 2000, Murray 2001) to emerge, and for alternative kinship networks to flourish and grow. During times of distress, poverty, or violence, the friendships that had developed during the project proved to be personally and professionally invaluable for all of us.

Education as a research tool enhanced the relationship between myself and the participants by providing a platform for mutual exchange, knowledge sharing, trust and rapport building, and the development and strengthening of interpersonal bonds. However, it also challenged us to confront our "multiplex subjectivities" (Rosaldo 1989) and "culturally entangled identities" (Narayan 1997/2003). My multiple and shifting roles as a peer and fellow "global girl," advocate and mentor, facilitator/teacher and researcher were at times confusing to the women, and were subjectivities that had to be continuously negotiated and (re)understood.

The *Global Girls Project* was an attempt at transformative egalitarianism which married "an ethical self with an awareness that is activist, critical, and multiple" (Lincoln and Cannella 2008: 8). Rather than a neocolonialist effort to rescue "helpless" bar girls or save "unchaste" professional girlfriends and sex workers from a life of "ill-repute," this action-research project sought to create a destigmatizing and empowering space for collective action and solidarity, and information and knowledge sharing between peers. As opposed to employing Spivak's (2004) vertical terminology of learning from "below" or "above," I would argue that I "learned to learn" from "across"—across borders and boundaries of race, class, nationality and power. Rather than a detached and objective exercise in "passive scholarship" (Kelletts 2009), the project attempted an ethical and anticolonial example of praxis anthropology—whereby intellect (theory) and active engagement in social realities (practice) were brought together to produce knowledge as a means of transformation.

## References


Agustín, L. M. (2007), *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry,* London, Zed Books.

Bourdieu, P. (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

---- (2003), *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*, London, Verso.

Bourgois, P. (1995), *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Busza, J. (2004a), 'Participatory research in Constrained Settings: Sharing Challenges from Cambodia,' *Action Research* 2(2): 207–224.

---- (2004b), 'Protection and Participation: An Interactive Programme Introducing the Female Condom to Migrant Sex Workers in Cambodia,' *AIDS Care* 16(4): 507-518.

---- and B. T. Schunter (2001), 'From Competition to Community: Participatory Learning and Action among Young, Debt-Bonded Vietnamese Sex Workers in Cambodia,' *Reproductive Health Matters* 9(17): 72-81.

Butler, J. (1993), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York, Routledge.

Cesara, M. (1982), *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Place,* New York, Academic Press.

Chandler, D. (1984), 'Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-Colonial Cambodian Society,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15(2): 271-279.

Derks, A. (2008), *Khmer Women on the Move: Exploring Work and Life in Urban Cambodia,* Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.

EBL Coaching (2004), *Strategies for Study Success: Extended Paragraphs: A Multi-Sensory Approach to Written Language Success*, New York, EBL Coaching, Inc.

Ervin, A. M. (2000), *Applied Anthropology*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Escobar, A. (1992), 'Culture, Economics and Politics in Latin American Social Movements, Theory and Research' in A. Escobar and S. Alvarez (eds), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*. Boulder, Westview, pp. 62-85.

---- (1995), *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Finn, P. (2000), *Awesome Activities to Help Reluctant Writers Succeed: Strategies, Mini-Lessons, and Motivating Activities to Boost Writing Skills and Writing Confidence,* New York: Scholastic Inc.

Ford, C.M. (1997), *101 Bright Ideas: ESL Activities for All Ages.* Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Foucault, M. (1980), 'Truth and Power,' in M. Foucault (ed.), *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Fuller, C. (1996), 'Chris Fuller,' in P. Wade (ed.), *Advocacy in Anthropology: The GDAT Debate 1995*, Manchester, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester.

Hastrup, K. and P. Elsass (1990), 'Anthropological Advocacy: A Contradiction in Terms,' *Current Anthropology* 31(3): 301-311.

Hoefinger, H. (2010), Negotiating Intimacy: Transactional Sex and Relationships Among Cambodian Professional Girlfriends, *unpublished PhD thesis*, Goldsmiths, University of London, London.

---- (2011), 'Professional Girlfriends: an Ethnography of Sexuality, Solidarity and Subculture in Cambodia,' *Cultural Studies* 25 (2): 244–66.

---- (2013), *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional Girlfriends and Transactional Relationships,* London: Routledge.
Hooks, B. (2000), *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
Hunter, M. (2002), 'The Materiality of Everyday Sex: Thinking Beyond "Prostitution",' *African Studies* 61(1): 99-120.
Irwin, K. (2006), 'Into the Dark Heart of Ethnography: The Lived Ethics and Inequality of Intimate Field Relationships,' *Qualitative Sociology* 29(2): 155-175.
Kasumi, N. (2006), *More Than White Cloth? Women's Rights in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh: Cambodian Defenders Project.
Kellett, P. (2009), 'Advocacy in Anthropology: Active Engagement or Passive Scholarship?' *Durham Anthropology Journal* 16(1): 22-31.
Klippel, F. (1984), *Keep Talking: Communicative Fluency Activities for Language Tea*ching, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kulick, D. (1995), 'The Sexual Life of Anthropologists: Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork,' in D. Kulick and M. Willson (eds), *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork,* New York: Routledge, pp. 1-28.
---- and M. Willson (eds) (1995), *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, New York: Routledge.
Law, L. (2000), *Sex Work in Southeast Asia: The Place of Desire in a Time of AIDS,* London: Routledge.
Layton, R. (1996), 'Robert Layton,' in P. Wade (ed.), *Advocacy in Anthropology: The GDAT Debate 1995*, Manchester, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester.
Ledgerwood, J. (1990), Changing Khmer Conceptions of Womanhood: Women, Stories and the Social Order, *unpublished PhD thesis,* Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.
Lincoln, Y. and G. Cannella (2008), 'Ethics and the Broader Rethinking/Reconceptualization of Research as Construct,' *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 9(2): 273-285.
McRobbie, A. (2007), 'Top Girls? Young Women and the Post-feminist Sexual Contract,' *Cultural Studies* 21(4-5): 718-737.
---- (2009), *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London: Sage.
Mohanty, C. (2003 [1986]), 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in C. Mohanty (ed), *Feminism Without Borders,* Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 333-358.
Murray, A. (2001), *Pink Fits: Sex, Subcultures and Discourses in the Asia-Pacific,* Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute.
Narayan, K. (2003 [1997]), 'How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?' in R. Lewis and S.Mills (eds) *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 285-305.
Newton, E. (1993), 'My Best Informant's Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork,' *Cultural Anthropology* 8: 3-23.
NIS (2005), *Education, Summary Subject Matter Report for the Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey 2004*, Phnom Penh, National Institute of Statistics.
Oakley, A. (1981), 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,' in H. Roberts (ed), *Doing Feminist Research,* Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 30-61.
Patai, D. (1991), 'U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?' in S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History,* New York: Routledge, pp. 137-153.
Pratt, M. L. (1986), 'Fieldwork in Common Places,' in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 27-50.
---- (1992), *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge.
Rocheleau, D. E. (1994), 'Particapatory Research and the Race to Save the Planet: Questions, Critique, and Lessons from the Field,' *Agriculture and Human Values* 11(2-3): 4-25.
Rosaldo, R. (1989), *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Boston: Beacon Press.
Said, E. (1978), *Orientalism*, New York: Random House.
---- (1993), *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Random House.
---- (1997[1985]), 'Orientalism Reconsidered,' in B. Moore-Gilbert, G. Stanton and W. Maley (eds), *Postcolonial Criticism,* London: Addison Wesley Longman, pp. 126-144.
Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995), 'The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology,' *Current Anthropologist* 36(3): 409-440.
Singer, M. (1990), 'Another Perspective on Advocacy,' *Current Anthropology* 31(5): 548-550.
Skeggs, B. (1995), 'Theorising, Ethics and Representation in Feminist Ethnography,' in B. Skeggs (ed), *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 190-206.
Spivak, G. (1988), 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-316.

---- (1993), *Outside In The Teaching Machine*, New York: Routledge.
---- (1999), *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a Critique of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
---- (2004), 'Righting Wrongs,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2/3, Spring/Summer): 523-581.
Stacey, J. (1991/1988), 'Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?' in S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History,* New York: Routledge, pp. 111-120.
Wacquant, L. (2004), *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, New York: Oxford University Press.
Wade, P., Ed. (1996), *Advocacy in Anthropology: The GDAT Debate 1995*, Manchester, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester.

## Notes

[1] All participant names are pseudonyms so as to protect their anonymity.
[2] "Hostess bars" are establishments where women sit, chat, flirt and act as "hostesses" to typically "western" male clientele.
[3] "Ladies drinks" are alcoholic/non-alcoholic beverages purchased for the bar workers by customers, where a USD$1 surcharge is added on to the price, which is then returned to the worker in her wages. For example, if she earns five "ladies drinks" in a shift, she thus earns an extra $5 on top of her salary.
[4] For an in-depth description and discussion on "professional girlfriends" see Hoefinger (2010, 2011, 2013). It must be noted that, although they are stereotyped as such, professional girlfriends do not identify as "prostitutes" (those who engage in a commercial exchange of sex for cash). Instead, PGs construct their "western" partners as "real" boyfriends, and view the transactional relationships that develop as "real" relationships which are linked to a wider set of non-conjugal obligations. Here the term "transactional" refers to materially-motivated *gift-based* sexual and intimate exchanges (Hunter 2002), which are different from "commercial" exchanges which imply actual *money* traded for intimacy or sex. And the term "western" is used by Cambodian women to refer to their *barang* (e.g. foreign) partners from the US, Canada, Central and South America, Europe, New Zealand and Australia. Often times, the women also associate the term "western" with practices or cultural products they deem to be "liberal" and/or "modern."
[5] "Bar girl" (*srei bar*) is a term that women employed in bars self-reference with. Other English terms used include "bartender," "barmaid" or "waitress." "Taxi girl" is the local term used in English to refer to direct sex workers, or those who exchange sex for cash. See Law (2000), Murray (2001), and Derks (2008) for more on mobile and shifting subjectivities in the context of bar and sex work in Asia.
[6] See Hoefinger (2013) for specific examples of the generational solidarity formed between myself and the young women.
[7] "Intimate ethnography" is the term I use to describe the practice of conducting ethnographic research by forming deep, interpersonal and long-lasting relationships with participants in the existential, postmodern and feminist veins of the "carnal" sociology/anthropology of Cesara (1982), Newton (1993), Bourgois (1995), Kulick and Wilson (1995), Wacquant (2004) and Irwin (2006), for example. For more on "intimate ethnography" see Hoefinger (2010, 2013).
[8] See Hoefinger (2013) for examples of how improved linguistic ability in English assisted women in negotiating out of some precarious situations with boyfriends and customers.
[9] For example, there were a few complaints from Cambodian men that I was being exclusionary by not letting them participate in the free classes.
[10] For other critiques of participatory action research, see Escobar (1992, 1995) and Rocheleau (1994). For more examples of participatory action research in Cambodia, see Busza and Schunter (2001) and Busza (2004a, 2004b).
[11] These include World Vision, International Justice Mission (IJM), and Chab Dai, for example.
[12] Examples of rights-based sex worker advocacy groups in Cambodia include Womyn's Network for Unity (WNU)—which is the 6,400-member self-organized sex/entertainment worker union, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW).
[13] Though I had not anticipated women bringing their children to the classes in the initial research plan, Sochua was eager for her daughter to participate, so I made the ethical decision to allow the child to take part with her mother's oral consent. The daughter attended only one of the four formal classroom sessions, but after the format of the project shifted, the three of us would often practice English language activities together in Sochua's home.
[14] It's interesting to note here how Tina taught herself English: she walked into an Internet cafe and asked one of the employees to teach her how to use *Yahoo Messenger*. Using very basic introductory phrases that she learned in the bars, she started chatting with English speakers from all over the world. She showed me the tattered piece of cardboard where she used to write down unfamiliar words. Later, she'd learn their meanings through online dictionaries or from other people. Through this ingenious method, she taught herself how to speak and write English fluently in just one year of living in the city. This example is evidence of the determination and creative ways young women are taking initiative and improving their lives without the need for "rescue" or external organized "help."
[15] However, this hypothesis somewhat fizzled as well, when I approached completely new groups of women who had no prior knowledge of me and my work, and when I tried to dress conservatively and "teacherly," and none of those "new" participants turned up for the classes either.

[16] Although I was a white, middle class researcher from the north conducting action-based research with working class women from the south, I believe that the women ultimately utilized our relationships that resulted from the project in ways that were constructive to them, and to a certain degree, there was a constant re-negotiation of power that shifted back and forth between us. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1980), I view power as a fluid, decentralized and shifting force which is not "possessed" by individuals but rather animated and exercised it in different ways, in different situations. It is from this perspective that I reflect on, and reconcile, the power differentials between myself and the global girls in this study. See Hoefinger (2013) for in depth discussions on power, positionality and multiplex subjectivities in relation to this action-based research, and to the broader longitudinal ethnographic study that this project was couched in.