

# Anthropology at ‘home’ through the lens of intersubjectivity

## Counter-transference while interviewing a ‘vulnerable’ Vietnamese woman

Nguyễn Thu Hương

*How do native anthropologists deal with subjective feelings that arise in carrying out their research? How are these feelings associated with the researcher’s commonality of cultural identity with the vulnerable women being studied? As a framework for thinking through these issues, this paper considers the notion of intersubjectivity as a discursive tool, which might help elucidate the complex ways the researcher’s intuition, senses and emotions are woven into the interview process, forming an integral part thereof. More specifically, the paper considers the concept of counter-transference, a notion rooted in psychotherapy literature, as a mode of interpretation to articulate and identify ambiguities that operate beneath the dynamic interaction of the interview process. Based on the premise that the degree of subjective experience is an inherent part of conducting research, the paper will rely on Levinas’s notion of ethical responsibility in an attempt to elucidate the nature of doing fieldwork within one’s own culture.*

*[native anthropology, psychotherapy, intersubjectivity, counter-transference, Levinas, ethical responsibility, vulnerable women, Vietnam]*

It seems obvious that conducting ethnographic fieldwork in one’s own society has many advantages. For one, the native researcher’s grasp of the language and familiarity with local surroundings are likely to give him/her better access to the subjects under study than a foreigner. Moreover, conducting research in domestic settings has often been associated with an environment of safety and relative comfort as the word ‘home’ may imply (Messerschmidt 1981). However, there is ample evidence indicating that the ethnographic road for the native researcher is not as smooth as it may seem.

Recent years have witnessed a growing body of work in anthropological literature that highlights the uncomfortable and contradictory nature of doing fieldwork in one’s own society (e.g. Altorki & El-Solh 1988; Hastrup 1995; Bernhard 1998; Peirano 1998; Reis 1998; Van Dongen 1998; Pellatt 2003). Some point out the risks and

experiences of physical and emotional trauma (Hume & Mulcock 2004), especially for those whose research topics touch upon cultural, social and political sensitivities (e.g. Nguyen Thu Huong 2004). In this connection, this paper will refer to analogies between the position of a native anthropologist and that of a native psychotherapist working with clients from his or her own cultural ethnic background. Also, the emotional difficulties of touching upon culturally shared sensitivities will be taken into account (Kareem & Littlewood 1992).

Little attention has been given to the practical dilemmas that the native anthropologist encounters with respect to managing his or her own subjectivity during the intersubjective engagement of the ethnographic interview process. These dilemmas stem from the assumption that, as an insider, the native anthropologist may experience some difficulty with keeping emotional distance when conducting fieldwork in his or her country of origin. How do native anthropologists deal with subjective feelings that arise in carrying out their research? How are these feelings associated with the researcher's commonality of cultural identity with the vulnerable women being studied?

As a framework for thinking through these issues, this paper considers the notion of intersubjectivity as a discursive tool, which might help elucidate the complex ways the researcher's intuition, senses and emotions are woven into the interview process, and thus become an integral part of them. More specifically, the paper considers the concept of counter-transference, a notion rooted in psychotherapy, as a mode of interpretation to articulate and identify ambiguities that operate beneath the dynamic interaction of the interview process. While questions may be raised about a comparison between the anthropologist's emotional reactions to research participant and the specificity of counter-transference in psychotherapy practice, it nonetheless provides a medium to describe and understand the researcher's subjective experience in the pursuit of anthropological fieldwork. Based on the premise that the degree of subjective experience is an inherent part of conducting research, the paper will rely on Levinas's notion of ethical responsibility in an attempt to elucidate the nature of doing fieldwork within one's own culture. In the scope of this paper, I will adopt the concept of intersubjectivity to explore how the experience or consciousness of participating subjects may be influenced and conditioned by their mutual interaction and active engagement (cf. Tankink & Vysma 2006).

## **Case presentation**

Most of this paper focuses on the question of interpreting the situation of an 'other' with respect to one's existing knowledge base. Put differently, my account is related to the ambiguity of subjective feelings, which, as a conceptually independent process, may both facilitate and interfere with the ethnographer's interpretive practices and hence the attainment of intersubjectivity with the subjects of study. The following is an analysis of part of an interview that took place during my research on rape victimization in Hà Nội during 2005. I have chosen this as a case study because it affected me in a specific way, which may be illustrative of the complexities inherent in doing research at 'home.'

The episode is taken from a three-hour conversation with a twenty three-year-old woman I will call Phụng who learned about my research by picking up one of the leaflets which my assistants and I had distributed at key points around the city to 'recruit' rape victims for my study. At that time Phụng was working as a waitress at an eating-house selling the local noodle soup called 'phở'. The place was located in a poor quarter of Hà Nội near the banks of the Red River. As Phụng told me, the leaflet had impressed her deeply, but it took her a week before she decided to come to see me. We first met at my office on a rainy afternoon during the first days of the spring of 2005. After that we made arrangements to meet each other twice a week until Phụng headed back home for the *Tết* holidays – the traditional Vietnamese New Year.

Phụng told me about her family. Her parents came from a coastal village of Thái Bình province. She is the second of four children. The family moved to a small island off the northeastern coast of Vietnam when she was 12. Her father had been a fisherman but it was hard work so he gave it up to become a motorbike-taxi driver. Her mother, besides doing the usual domestic chores, ran a teahouse from home and sold groceries at the local morning market. Phụng's elder brother repaired bikes and sometimes earned extra money as a fisherman. Her younger sister married a young man from Móng Cái, a town close to the Chinese border, and has a one-year-old boy. Because Phụng failed her fifth year of school, she dropped out of elementary school. Her youngest brother is the only person in the family who reached high school level.

When she was 14, Phụng was sexually abused by a relative on her mother's side. She kept silent about it because she was afraid that no one would believe her. Three years later, a neighbour helped Phụng get a job in a shoe company in Hải Phòng, the northeast province about 100 kilometres from Hà Nội. She worked there for about a year and was fired when the company ran into difficulties. Since Phụng did not want to go back to the island, she looked for a new job in the port city of Hải Phòng, but had no success. She ended up working as a waitress in a karaoke bar, and then gradually got into prostitution. After a police raid on the brothel, Phụng fled to Hà Nội, where she worked in nightclubs for about ten months, then left for Hồ Chí Minh city. In Hồ Chí Minh City Phụng worked in a 'restaurant', which was in fact a disguised brothel. During all this time her parents thought she was employed by a private company because she told them that in letters she sent home on a regular basis. While she was in Hồ Chí Minh City, her mother once came to see her and persuaded her to go home. Phụng said that her mother was worried that it would be very difficult for her to find a husband if she kept moving from place to place. And there were 'bad' rumors about Phụng being a prostitute at home. Phụng went back home with her mother. But just after a year she left again, heading for Hà Nội. At the time I got to know her, in January 2005, she had already given up prostitution. First she worked as an ambulant vendor, selling tea and snacks in downtown areas, then worked in a 'quán phở', eating house selling noodle soup, not far from where she rented her room. In early February 2005, she went home for the *Tết* holiday and stayed there for some time. Six months later, she ran away to Hà Nội for the second time and earned a living as an ambulant vendor selling hosiery.

## Locus of understanding

The conversation took place during one of *Phượng*'s visits to my office in the autumn of 2005. During this episode I was trying to get a sense of how *Phượng* interacted with other people, in particular men, after her experience of being raped by a relative and working as a prostitute. As usual, I began by asking her about how things were going with her during the past few days. She told me how she felt being back in Hà Nội again, and mentioned about a chance meeting with a stranger.

A couple of days ago I had a small talk with a man while I was selling hosiery downtown. He was walking on the pavement when I tried to get him to buy a pair of gloves. He started teasing me... I also teased him back... Nothing unusual, right? It's normal, isn't it? Then he asked me to go and eat supper with him. Fine, let's go. I said. It would be OK if I just go and chat with him for a while. Would be fun, I thought. He ordered a large plate of fried noodles for me. After that he asked me whether I want to go with him somewhere, but I refused. "Well, if I don't like the idea, he won't insist, he said."

At this particular point in the conversation, I felt a sense of anxiety rising in me, particularly when *Phượng* asked: "Nothing unusual, right? It is normal, isn't it?" I was thinking that the man was about to lure *Phượng* into a 'trap.' How is it possible for the guy to 'get' *Phượng* just by offering her a plate of fried noodles? If this is the case, why is it so easy for her to be 'caught' like this? Is she really so naïve about the kindness of a total stranger? Is she aware of the possibility of being taken advantage of by that man? Honestly speaking, I could not help feeling that this might be a first step leading *Phượng* back to her former occupation as a sex worker that she was trying to get away from. Suddenly I found myself overwhelmed by social prejudices about the so-called 'romantic industry' (Delacoste & Alexander 1987) of which *Phượng* used to be part. In this frame of mind, I wondered how a 'normal' woman could exchange such banal talk with a total stranger, and even go so far as to accept a meal from him.

An old story I had read crossed my mind: a peasant 'picks up' a starving woman from the street and offers her a bowl of plain rice before making her his wife. But the circumstances are different, since the story occurs against the backdrop of the 1945 famine, which caused the death of more than two million Vietnamese. In *Phượng*'s case, it was just a plate of fried noodle, she was not starving, and the man's motive was probably casual sex rather than marriage. At this stage I let my own feelings interfere with the direction of conversation:

H: Really? Why on earth did he invite you for a supper?

P: Well, maybe because I first asked him to buy a pair of gloves. He looked at the gloves then teased me: "I just want to buy you." I replied: "I am very expensive so you can't afford me, I am afraid." He pursued it further, "So how much?" I insisted, "Very expensive, you can't afford it, I am sure." "Doesn't matter." "No, I am sure." We exchanged a few more words, and then he asked me whether I had eaten yet. I said to him that I hadn't had time for lunch that day. He invited me for supper.

H: What did you say then?

P: "Fine, let's go," that's what I said. Nothing to be afraid of. During the meal, he asked questions about me: where am I from; where do I stay; how much do I earn a day as an ambulant vendor, etc. I told him that I am staying in a rented room nearby, that's why I choose this neighbourhood to sell my stuff. After that, he showed an interest in taking me out. However, I made an excuse that I would have to sell all my goods before dark. He promised to buy all of the goods from me. I said that it was quite a lot and he wouldn't have enough money to buy all those things.

H: When he invited you for supper, what did you think?

P: I found it fun to chat with him. It's nice to get to know someone, right? When I said I didn't want to go out with him, he didn't insist. Of course I know... by looking at the way he dressed I felt that he would be that kind of person. I knew it. That was why I indulged in small talk with him. I can tell about people, especially men, just by taking a glance at them.

H: Would it be the same if the man changed his attitude when you said 'no' to him? How would you deal with that situation?

P: Hey, sister (laughed), at worst I would pay for my meal, even if it would cost me all the *đồng* (Vietnamese currency) that I earned that day. But, as I said before, the man didn't look like that kind of person.

Deconstructing the interaction between Phụng and the stranger may help us to gain insights into the code of conduct regarding gender difference in Vietnamese society. In the context of Vietnamese culture, men's behaviour such as teasing, chatting up members of the opposite sex with sexual under- (or overtones) even without their approval, may be socially acceptable. As pointed out by Khuất Thu Hồng (2004) in her recent research on the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the work place in Vietnam, the concept of sexual harassment has only been introduced to local society by Western media in the past few years; it is not recognized as an offence in the legal system. The man's statement, "I just want to buy you", which is devoid of normal expressions of romantic feelings might cause the interlocutor to feel displeased, even offended and upset. Behind the man's teasing behaviour, we might perceive an overture for a possible deal to be negotiated between the two parties, couched in word-play, half in jest and half in earnest. Phụng's response "I am very expensive so you can't afford it" implies that she is not that 'cheap' as he might think. Reading between the lines, one may perceive that the young woman thinks of herself rather confidently, which in turn reveals a sense of her own agency – a topic beyond the scope of this paper.

Returning to the conversation, Phụng does not become angry or even just walk away as a young girl might do to avoid further complications. Given her position as an ambulant vendor who spends most of her day on the streets where the risks to her own security have to be taken into account, an outright rejection of the man's overture seems unreasonable. Instead, she reacts to his rather direct opening in a rather playful manner. This playful reaction helps avoid any tension or bad feelings that may arise from the chance encounter. For example Phụng could feel abused if the stranger makes too overt an overture; the man could feel trapped if she is too friendly. By

the same token, he could feel rejected and frustrated if she becomes outraged. She explains to me that she feels there is no harm in returning his teasing words.

Is her reaction, I ask myself, a reflection of her past experiences in dealing with men as a sex worker? If this is the case I fear that she may be tempted to fall back into the prostitution trap again. On the other hand, if I did not know about her life story, would my attitude be considerably different? Phụng once told me about her brief romantic relationship with a young student whom she got to know while selling snacks in downtown Hà Nội. On Christmas Eve he took her out on a date and then to a public park to have sex. After that night, Phụng realized that he had no intention of maintaining a serious relation with her. She felt that she had been misused and decided to drop him. As Phụng told me:

At the beginning of our relationship, he kept telling me that one day he would bring me home to introduce to his parents. Just promises! After that night, he tried to meet me again but I asked my roommate to tell him that I had gone to work. I did not want to see him. He just wanted to take advantage of me.

To a certain extent, Phụng's reaction reflects the social norms of what is considered to be 'true love' among Vietnamese youth, which requires the young man to introduce the girl to his parents to show his serious intentions with a tacit promise of future marriage. Nonetheless, by taking this earlier episode as a point of reference, I gathered that Phụng is not naïve about men; she is, in fact, quite knowledgeable about them. I then realize that the reason she agrees to have supper with this stranger is just to bring a joyful moment to her dreary daily routine. It was that simple. A closer look at her life story might shed some light on this point.

Phụng is by nature the kind of person who enjoys socializing with other people. She felt that life on the little island where she spent most of her youth was extremely dull.

I usually stayed home all day because there is no place for me to hang out. Whenever I feel depressed I would ride my bike around the island. But it is such a small place that anywhere I go I'm bound to run into my father transporting his customers on the back of his motor-bike. When he gets home he would scold me for roaming about like an ill-bred girl.

Helping her mother to look after their family-run teashop, Phụng hopes to have a chance to communicate with other people. However, Phụng recalls:

My mother would give me an angry look if I happened to make an innocent joke with some young customers, reminding me to behave myself. You know, there was nothing serious. One guy teased me by asking if I would marry him, he would ask his parents to come and talk with my parents. But my mother disliked such talks. So I was sent to the kitchen to prepare the family meal instead. Sometimes my elder brother's friends came over to our place for dinner. If I talked with them during the meal my mother would give me a stern look, remarking that whatever I say would interest nobody.

If one connects Phụng's reactions with local Vietnamese assumptions regarding the conduct of good female morality, one should bear in mind that in the family the mother in particular is responsible for bringing up her daughter, teaching her how to behave and speak properly. As argued by Rydstrom (2003), in spite of the fact that moral attitudes toward girls and women in Vietnam have changed profoundly in the last decades, there is a "continuous flow of directions, requests, and instructions directed at girls" (2003: 7), including "dimensions of both Confucian and communist moralities, which through daily social practices are merged into a moral syncretism" (2003: 50).

In Phụng's case the way in which she interacts with her mother shows that she has different ideas about good manners for girls, "There was nothing serious." This also implies that Phụng does not feel comfortable with her mother's supervision. Moreover in her family Phụng is not close to anyone. She feels estranged from her elder brother so she rarely talked to him. Phụng does not get along with her younger sister either, who frequently bullies her. The only one she feels close is her little brother who is still at school. Since leaving school in the fifth class she has no friends of the same age group at home or in Hanoi. Phụng once said that she dreams of having her own clothing shop so that she would be able to meet all sorts of people. Thus, the friendliness she shows to the stranger may reflect an attempt to seek companionship, a way to escape her loneliness. On the one hand, Phụng is vulnerable because of her need to seek new attachment in an environment far removed from her familiar home base. On the other hand, Phụng's decision to leave home might be interpreted as a sign of her own strength, a determination to start life afresh.

### **Troubling questions and the threat of subjectivity**

When I analyzed the interview afterwards, I was surprised by my emotional responses to Phụng's utterances. Specifically, I tried to figure out how my subjectivity comes into the picture, how the similarity of our cultural identities may have impacted these responses. As a Vietnamese woman, I can and do claim some commonality with my informant as a strategy for access. In addition to the positive effect of cultural proximity, I found myself being emotionally affected by my interviewee's points of commonality in relation to me. Phụng has presumed that because of our similar cultural background we would share the same basic understanding of the world.

Take Phụng's own words "nothing unusual, right? It's normal, isn't it?" for example. From her questions we can perceive a number of assertions and contradictions. "Nothing unusual, right?" might indicate that Phụng is aware of the risk of being regarded as a woman of easy virtue for responding teasingly to a complete stranger. And despite this risk, her hope of attracting a worthy customer makes her engage in small talk with the man. But she further asks me, perhaps for re-assurance: "it is normal, isn't it?" It seems as if Phụng sensed that her attitude could be seen as 'abnormal' and thus she tries to convince herself that 'it is normal.' Perhaps there might also be an element of shame or even regret after she told the story: I did it my way, but what would others (in this case the interviewer) think of me now? In a way this may



reflect Phụng's awareness of the social expectations of what proper behaviour is for Vietnamese women. One wonders if Phụng's reaction would have been the same if the teasing customer had been a lady. And what does she mean by 'normal'? Is it just 'normal' for her to react in the way she does? Or would it be 'normal' for any woman to act like this in a similar situation? As I hear her saying "it's normal," I cannot help thinking that her reaction reflects her past dealings with men from the time she earned her living as a sex worker.

Furthermore, by asking me those questions, and then proceeding further without knowing what my position is, Phụng presumes that I would have a similar opinion on this particular point. It seems that in searching for a way of fitting her behaviour into socially acceptable norms Phụng takes me as her sounding board. Putting it differently, Phụng is looking for someone who could mirror her emotions, her mixed feelings and her quest for a new identity. Nevertheless there is more than that, because Phụng is also searching for a 'mirroring response' in the eyes of the observer (in this case me). It seems obvious that she is faced with feelings of ambiguity in her life situation ("it's normal, isn't it?"); in fact she might need a kind of 'affect mirroring' or a 'social referent' (Emde 1983) to help her re-think about her life history and her actual situation.

Now let us look at how a native anthropologist like me enters the field as a researcher. The available published literature strongly suggests that being a native anthropologist implies a greater potential for value conflict (Altorki & El-Solh 1988), a greater pressure to conform to local social norms, and a certain propensity towards preconceived notions (Hastrup 1995: 157-158). Although my insider status brings me advantages, I do feel discomfort and awkwardness toward my respondent. I try to maintain my composure, and suppress a desire not to say: "No, it is not normal, at least to me."

Why do I feel different to Phụng at that point? And how am I so readily connected to the social prejudice regarding women working in prostitution? The questions puzzle me whenever I reread my field notes describing my emotional reactions during the conversation. When I re-examine my emotional response, I realize that it seems to me that there is a gulf separating me from someone who has been stigmatized by prostitution, although this is in no way clear-cut and is fraught with ambiguities. It looks as if it has something to do with our different personal histories and life experiences. As England (1994) aptly notes, the biography of the researcher, which passes through our perceptions and interpretations of the fieldwork experience, plays a central role in the research process. This biography is personal and cultural in the sense that both Phụng and I wanted to get away from our place of origin: I left my home in Hanoi for Europe to study while Phụng left her native village for the streets of Hanoi. Moreover, I have been abroad and then come 'home' to conduct research. Obviously Phụng wishes to be seen as 'normal' and may not want to be reminded of her status as a former prostitute. By stressing these differences, I do not mean to characterize my participation in the interview as one in which my privilege as a rather well-educated, middle-class, urban researcher may negatively influence the outcome of the interview itself.

Like all anthropologists I attach great importance to the task of learning how to open myself up to the viewpoints, practices, and experience of the 'other' as much



as possible. This process, coined by Prus (1996) as the hermeneutics of access, is an attempt to establish intersubjectivity in order to understand the sense-making activities of the 'other.' Yet, notwithstanding, this initial effort to establish intersubjectivity is complicated by the fact that the anthropologists cannot always deliberately place themselves in a non-involved objective position without being affected by the taken-for-granted rules and expectations of their own culture. As Colic-Peisker (2004) argues, it is not always easy to maintain a detached attitude toward those one studies. In order to reflect upon what goes on between researcher and informant 'at home,' detachment can only help to reach a degree of trustworthiness, which is vital to get valid conclusions; hence in the intersubjective discourse, the act of being 'present' and 'participation' would carry more weight. Detachment would mean not only dealing with deciding if her behaviour was normal, but also with not interfering with my anxieties over Phụng, keeping my thoughts empathetic, mirroring the complexities and ambivalences in Phụng's question. She is not in an *either/or* situation – normal *or* abnormal but rather in an *and/and* dilemma – resilient *and* vulnerable, strong *and* at risk all at once. In the same way the intersubjective observer can be *both* detached and engaged: a neutral observer from outside Vietnam and an engaged participant from inside the country. This seems to be especially problematic for native anthropologists because of the fact that they themselves are imbued in the culture of their informants, which in turn, brings into question their ability to be 'objective' to the individuals they are seeking to better understand.

In my case, during a fleeting moment in the interview, I am also affected by the social discourses about women's behaviour in Vietnamese society. This gives rise to a feeling of anxiety about Phụng's risk of being taken advantage of by that stranger. But beyond that feeling, it also has something to do with my personal prejudice associated with turning my Vietnamese-female researcher's gaze to Phụng's attitude toward the stranger. This accounts, to some extent, for the feelings of inadequacy and subjectivity that I experienced during the interview. I have to wonder whether someone who does not share the experience of being a Vietnamese female would have interpreted Phụng's narrative in the same way or have similar feelings.

My point is that conducting fieldwork in one's own society is more often affected by introspection, reflecting the apparent tension between the role of a supposedly neutral researcher and that of the 'native' female that I am. In this sense, the researcher's own reflection, intuition and thinking can serve as 'a springboard for interpretations' and bring more general insight (Finlay & Gough 2003: 9). Here one may ask whether this subjectivity is a comment on the researcher's integrity. Indeed, where does all of this leave those who wish to conduct research with integrity about the world that they are a part of? Can these types of dilemmas be resolved, and if so, how? I am quite uncertain about the answers to these questions. However, at this point, my position is this: since the researcher is first and foremost a human being and his/her reactions are an integral part of the interview process, it is important to explore how this subjectivity comes into play in the dialogical relationship between the researcher and the people being studied.

### Utilizing counter-transference with the researched

From a psychological perspective, my reactions to Phụng's story may be considered an instance of 'counter-transference' – a concept first formulated by Freud – which "arises (in the analyst) as a result of the patient's influence on his unconscious feelings, and we are almost inclined to insist that he shall recognize this counter-transference in himself and overcome it" (Stearns 2001: 1). Following Freud's line of thinking, the counter-transference should be worked through as a personal reaction of the therapist him/herself. After working through it in the therapist's own therapy, this counter-transference should no longer interfere with the therapy process. It is noteworthy that Heimann (1950), Kernberg (1965) and Tobin (1986) extend the notion of counter-transference to include all of the feelings or any transference reactions that the therapist experiences (during the therapy). They do not restrict it as an idiosyncratic problematic phenomenon, but rather consider the practitioner's emotional response to the patient as one of the most important tools for therapeutic work. Moreover, more recent work in psychology (Ross 2000; Barchilon 2001; Biancoli 2002; Hayes 2004; Arnd-Caddigan 2006) has advanced the notion of counter-transference to a stage where it is now considered to be a normal interpersonal occurrence. As a consequence, counter-transference has received a more positive meaning, offering important information about what goes on between human beings, making little distinction whether it involves a patient and a therapist, or an anthropological fieldworker and a research participant (cf. Tobin 1986). Thus, utilizing this concept to explore the emotional reactions of a native anthropologist in the interview process might facilitate the shift from viewing the researcher's emotional reactions solely as a hindrance to viewing them for their potential value in understanding the researched. Although I do not think my anthropological experience accurately conveys the precise relationship between the analyst and the analysed in the context of therapeutic experience, I can see a parallel between these two in the sense that the research relationship, like all interpersonal relationships, is an interplay between two human sensibilities who together create the interview outcome through their interaction.

Using the concept of 'counter-transference,' I stress a shift from the contribution of the person being analysed to the interpersonal dynamic as largely active, and the analyst's contribution as largely receptive. For this reason, my knowledge of Phụng's early life experience, and more importantly my Vietnamese identity are viewed as a framework for recognizing the induced feelings amidst the larger stream of my emotional response, and for relating it to what Phụng communicates to me. From this perspective, my subjectivity serves as the medium through which I am able to experience my interviewee's inductions. Phụng induces in me the wish not to see her as a sex worker or as a female that arouses men's sexual desire. My reaction "no, it is not normal" is a very good example of Freudian counter-transference that is not about the person of Phụng but about a broader discourse relating to Vietnamese womanhood continually subjected to a stream of moral precepts and social judgments. In this line of thought, while her behaviour seems to be understandable, I would still want to caution her about it because I am afraid it will cause her problems. In other words,

the experience with Phụng induces in me a shared feeling of strength and resilience, although we both experience a sense of loneliness and vulnerability, being single women. Above all, the experience of counter-transference structures my ability to develop an empathic relation with Phụng. Counter-transference, which is situationally mobilized on my part, might have implications for the questions I ask Phụng. In addition, my subjective feelings on Phụng's account might stem from the fact that we are both children with rather lonely childhoods and from families where daughters are neglected in favour of sons.

I would like to give a cautionary note here. In intercultural psychotherapy literature, there is a distinction between cultural counter-transference and personal counter-transference. Accordingly, the first refers to the fact that the researcher and the researched might originate from the same or different cultural worlds. The second is rooted in personal life histories within specific families. This case study is illustrative of the two categories of counter-transference. While cultural counter-transference is manifested by the way in which both Phụng and I react against 'the son-over-daughter preference' in Vietnamese society, personal counter-transference also occurs with the perception that we both share a sense of loneliness due to our decisions to leave home, albeit for different reasons.

Therefore, listening to Phụng talking about her family produces shared feelings, which to some extent blur our social backgrounds. This induces in me a sense of anxiety for Phụng, and enhances my sense of responsibility toward to her. This is in line with Levinas's concern for ethical responsibility since "the responsibilities I have to another increase in the measure that I respond to them" (Lingis 1999: 399). More precisely, it is the gaze of the other that creates an appeal in us, an appeal to act ethically about "the other". Thus, once I was back 'home', distributing leaflets in search of participants for my study, I felt a sense of responsibility towards my research participants accompanied by a need to act ethically. As a Vietnamese researcher who has been studying in the Netherlands for several years where ethical concern is of primary importance in conducting research, this strong wish to act 'ethically' could also explain why I should warn Phụng of the risk of being exploited sexually in her dealings with a total stranger. Similarly, in the context of an intercultural therapy, one might never return in the same way to his/her own culture, after having had therapeutic experiences with people from other cultures.

### **A sense of responsibility**

I have considered my emotional experience to the extent that it is activated by Phụng's communications. But going further, I want to look at these emotional reactions as they relate to my own self, as Levinas argues, "I have to respond to and for the Other without occupying myself with the Other's responsibility in my regard" (1987: 37). More emphatically, it is only possible for "care of the self to encompass care for others if there is from the beginning, if there is *already* a responsibility for the other" (Smart 1999: 100, emphasis in original).

As mentioned earlier, I fear that Phụng may be tempted to fall back into prostitution again. Given that Phụng has placed a great trust in me in sharing her traumatic experiences of rape and the hardships of a sex worker, it is only natural for me to feel concerned about her vulnerability. I feel I owe her moral support, I feel responsible for her well being, and in a way this brings forth the non-exploitative nature of my position as a researcher vis-à-vis her subject of study.

After the conversation with Phụng that afternoon I became more aware of Phụng's loneliness and made a conscious effort to meet her more often. I took her to lunch on several occasions and tried to get to know more about her life. I felt that there was more than just an encounter between a researcher and her informant. It seemed as if there was a sisterly bond between Phụng and me. I wonder whether being the only daughter in a family where sons are given preference made me sympathetic towards Phụng with all her troubles and early life's scars. Was it a subconscious attempt to fill a psychological gap on my part?

Furthermore, my feelings of anxiety arising from Phụng's story might be indicative of a personal concern: what if I may find myself in that situation? As a Vietnamese female, I am very much aware of the dangerous consequences of treading on insecure moral grounds, with social stigma attached to 'women of easy virtue,' prostitution, etc.. This primary susceptibility, in Levinas's view, is an ethical response because it brings out our vulnerability or exposure to what he refers to as "wound and outrages" (Moyn 2005). As Butler explains, "if I become responsible only through being acted on by an Other, that is because the 'I' first comes into being as a 'me' through being acted upon by an Other, and this primary impingement is already and from the start an ethical interpellation" (2005: 89). In this frame of mind, my emotional response is concern for myself, which led me to respond: "Really? Why on earth did he invite you for a supper? What did you say then? What did you think?" According to Levinas, the 'what' questions can be seen as "a special language inserting into the 'communication' of the speaking subject as an appeal for help, for aid addressed to another" (1981: 24). In other words, this kind of questioning is "used to speak of a subjectivity without a subject" (Blanchot 1986). Underlying my questions is not only a simple search for explanations on Phụng's part but also the suggestions for my would-be response in the case I myself should get involved in a similar situation. This happens by way of what Levinas (1981) refers to as *substitution*, "whereby the 'I' is understood as beset by an 'Other', which can be seen as a condition of our responsiveness to Other, even a condition of our responsibility *for* them" (emphasis in original; Butler 2005: 88). By asking her questions, I actually express my feelings to Phụng, although in a subtle way.

Based on Phụng's attempt to explain to me, I could feel her indignation, which derived from my inquiries, and in turn, would impact upon Phụng's experience of me. Phụng may have felt hurt because I underestimated her maturity. This made her realize the differences between us: she is the experienced, streetwise young woman used to rough real-life situations whereas I am the young single researcher straight from the academic ivory tower. I remember the times when talking about her experiences she often said: "you are still single. You must be shocked by the things I am telling you, right?" Then I realized that, given the cultural background of Vietnam,

the idea of a single girl like me doing research on a taboo subject such as rape is not readily accepted by most people (see, for example, Nguyễn Thu Hương 2004). The 'experienced' Phụng expressed doubts whether someone like me would be able to grasp the sexual aspects of life to understand what happened to her. In her mind, I might have seemed shocked not only by the story but also by the person telling it, and thus I might have a negative opinion about her. Therefore I told her that prior to engaging myself in this kind of research, I had not only studied a lot on the subject, but also talked to persons who are knowledgeable and deeply concerned about it. This created a positive effect on her, putting her at ease and thus smoothing further the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

Conceptually, my position as a Vietnamese female and my knowledge of Phụng's early life experience appear to be my subjectivity. This subjectivity makes me sensible to my interviewee's account and it is on the basis of this 'susceptibility' that I become responsible for Phụng. Here the notion of responsibility should be understood in Levinas's formulation as "I am *not* primarily responsible by virtue of my actions, but by virtue of the relation to the Other that is established at the level of my primary and irreversible susceptibility, my passivity prior to any possibility of action or choice" (Butler 2005: 88). For the purpose of understanding this chain of emotional reactions, the proximity I have with the interviewee is an essential component. Having said this, I do not wish to run the risk of isolating this research from other scholarly work on the practice of ethnography. This means that it is always possible for non-native anthropologists to come closer to experiencing and understanding the 'emic' point of view by 'being there' and actively taking part in the interactions at hand.

### **By way of conclusion**

This paper examined the experience of intersubjectivity pertaining to ethnographic research at home. As my case study bears out, subjective feelings can be at work at any given moment in the ethnographic dialogue. This is a natural outcome of the collaborative building of relationships between the researcher and the researched, especially when the two are part of the same cognitive world. It is important to recognize that such subjective experiences and the feelings of countertransference that accompany them are part of the practice of ethnography in one's own society. This is in line with the current emphasis on critical ethnography, stressing ethical considerations in fieldwork, while recognizing and contemplating contingencies of truth claims, value-laden inquiry and local knowledge as substantive analytical frameworks (Denzin 2003; cf. Madison 2005).

On a personal level, my experience shows how my subjectivity is informed by my engagement with the research participant, which in turn induces a sense of responsibility on my part toward the person being studied. Borrowing Levinas's words, to have a sense of the Other is to be responsible for the Other's life. This brings an extra dimension in research ethics particularly when it touches on topics of a highly sensitive nature.

## Note

Nguyen Thu Huong is currently following a PhD program at the Amsterdam for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The paper presents some of the reflections and findings from the research project *Sexual assault: case study of rape in present-day Vietnam from a sociocultural and gender perspective*, funded by the Toyota Foundation and carried out by the author in Hanoi in 2005. The author wishes to thank Sjaak van der Geest, Tine Gammeltoft and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments on an earlier draft. Special appreciation is due to Cao Xuân Tứ for editing this text at various stages. E-mail: hnguyen@fmg.uva.nl

## References

- Altorki, Soraya & Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (eds)  
1988 *Arab women in the field: Studying your own society*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Arnd-Caddigan, Margaret  
2006 Transference and countertransference in the treatment of adult survivors of abuse with a somatoform disorder. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 34: 293-302.
- Biancoli, Romano  
2002 Psychoanalyst's values and countertransference. *International Forum Psychoanal* 11: 10-17.
- Blanchot, Maurice  
1986 *The writing of the disaster*. Lincoln, NE [etc.]: University of Nebraska Press
- Brannen, Julia  
1988 Research note: The study of sensitive subjects. *Sociological Review* 36: 552-63.
- Butler, Judith  
2005 *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Colic-Peisker, Val  
2004 Doing ethnography in 'one's own ethnic community': The experience of an awkward insider. In: Lynne Hume & Jane. Mulcock (eds) *Anthropologists in the field. Cases in participant observation*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 82-94.
- Delacoste, Frédérique & Priscilla Alexander (eds)  
1987 *Sex work: Writings by women in the sex industry*. Pittsburgh, Pa [etc.]: Cleis Press.
- Denzin, Norman K.  
2003 *Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Emde, Robert N.  
1983 The pre-representational self and its affective core. *The Psycho-Analytic Study of the Child* 38: 165-92.
- England, Kim V.L.  
1994 Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *Professional Geographer* 46: 80-89.
- Finlay, Linda & Brendan Gough (eds)  
2003 *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*. Oxford [etc.]: Blackwell Science.

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg  
 2000 Subjectivity and intersubjectivity, subject and person. *Continental Philosophy Review* 33: 275-87.
- Geltner, Paul  
 2005 The concept of objective countertransference and its role in a two-person psychology. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 66: 25-42.
- Hadolt, Bernhard  
 1998 Locating difference: A medical anthropology 'at home'? *Anthropology & Medicine* 5: 311-22.
- Hayes, Jeffrey A.  
 2004 The inner world of the psychologist: a program of research on countertransference. *Psychotherapy Research* 14: 21-36.
- Hume, Lynne & Jane Mulcock (eds)  
 2004 *Anthropologists in the field. Cases in participant observation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jackson, Michael  
 1998 *Minima ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the anthropological project*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Kareem, Jafar & Roland Littlewood (eds)  
 1992 *Intercultural therapy: themes, interpretations and practice*. Oxford etc.: Blackwell Scientific Publications.
- Khuất Thu Hồng  
 2004 Sexual harassment at workplace. In: L. Drummond and H. Rydstrom (eds), *Gender practices in contemporary Vietnam*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 117-36.
- Lazar, Rina  
 2001 Subject in first person-subject in third person: subject, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 61: 395-407.
- Levinas, Emmanuel  
 1981 *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*. The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers [1974].  
 1987 *Time and the other* (and additional essays). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Lingis, Alphonso  
 1999 Objectivity and of justice: A critique of Emmanuel Levinas' explanation. *Continental Philosophy Review* 32: 395-407.
- Messerschmidt, Donald A.  
 1981 *Anthropologists at home in North America: Methods and issues in the study of one's own society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Madison, Soyini D.  
 2005 *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA Sage Publications.
- Moyn, Samuel  
 2005 *Origins of the other: Emmanuel Levinas between revelation and ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ortner, Sherry B.  
 2005 Subjectivity and cultural critique. *Anthropological Theory* 5: 31-52.



- Nguyễn Thu Hương  
 2004 *A great loss of one's own worth: case study of rape in present-day Vietnam through the victim's eyes*. Master thesis. The Netherlands: University of Amsterdam.  
 2006 Rape in Vietnam from socio-cultural and historical perspectives. *Journal of Asian History* 40 (2): 185-206.
- Prus, Robert. C.  
 1996 *Symbolic interaction and ethnographic research: Intersubjectivity and the study of human lived experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Reis, Ria  
 1998 Resonating to pain: Introspection as a tool in medial anthropology 'at home'. *Anthropology & Medicine* 5: 295-309.
- Rydstrom, Helle  
 2003 *Embodying morality: growing up in rural northern Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ross, Mo  
 2000 Body talk: Somatic countertransference. *Psychodynamic Counseling* 6, 451-67.
- Smart, Barry  
 1999 *Facing modernity: Ambivalence, reflexivity and morality*. London [etc.]: Sage.
- Song, Miri & David Parker  
 1995 Commonality, difference and the dynamics of disclosure in in-depth interviewing. *Sociology* 29 (2): 241-56.
- Strean, Herbert, S. (ed.)  
 2001 *Controversies on countertransference*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Tankink, Marian & Marianne Vysma  
 2006 The intersubjective as analytic tool in medical anthropology. *Medische Antropologie* 18 (1): 249-68.
- Tobin, Joseph, J.  
 1986 (Counter) transference and failure in intercultural therapy. *Ethos* 14 (2): 120-43.
- Van Dongen, Els & Sylvie Fainzang  
 1998 Editorial. Medical anthropology at home: Creating distance. *Anthropology & Medicine* 5, 245-50.
- Williams, Anne  
 1993 Diversity and agreement in feminist ethnography. *Sociology* 27: 575-89.