RELIGION, CULTURE AND RESILIENCE
among Cambodian survivors

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Many who survive traumatic events recover and thrive, while others do not...

TO UNDERSTAND HOW AND WHY

(a salutogenic question)
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Research aims

Uncover, understand, and explain the recovery and normalisation of resilient Cambodian survivors in order to contribute to improving the meeting between health workers and war refugees.
By finding out how they survived and recovered after traumatic events:

- What accounts they give
- What qualities or resources they have and how they work
- What assistance they received that helped
- How this can be made available for health and social workers
Today

- Mental health
- Sociological perspectives
- Selection criteria
- Method
- Preliminary findings
- Analyses
- Results
- Proposals
Mental health: 

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Stressors:

- The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.
- The person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

DSM-IV (APA, 2000)
Resilience

- An ability to withstand, overcome, and recover after serious, even life-threatening events (Masten, 2001)
They were tied to that big mango tree, one arm on each branch and beaten, then they were buried in piles under here. A palm tree was planted on top of each four... After Pol Pot was driven back, we gathered the children under that big tree and used it for a school. They used stones for chairs.
Sociological perspectives

Weber
Coherent systems of meaning
(*Sinnzusammenhänge*)

1999 / 1922

Berger
*Nomos* - the cognitive and normative edifice that passes for 'knowledge' in a society

1990/1967

Both:
Theodicy: the problem of evil
Selection criteria (minimum)

- > 45 years old
- > one year in a Khmer Rouge work camp
- > one year in a refugee camp.
- Lost at least one close family member.
- Witnessed beating and execution.
- Did not seek psychiatric help
- Did not depend on social welfare
- Said to be doing “remarkably well”
Methods

A multi-strategy approach to theory generation

- Biographical interviews (Denzin 1989), participant observation
- Microanalysis / grounded theory approach (Nvivo)
- Study of words and phrases
- (Abduction - Layder 97; Danermark 02)
- (Interviews with expert health workers)
## Preliminary findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical event =&gt;</th>
<th>Pol Pot Regime 1975 -78</th>
<th>Fall of Pol Pot 1979</th>
<th>Normalisation 1980 =&gt; ( present)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What they did</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Starved</td>
<td>Tried to find family</td>
<td>Struggled / worked</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worked hard</td>
<td>Worked-to-live</td>
<td>Gave / received help</td>
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<td>Exper. brutality</td>
<td>Talked about it</td>
<td>Held together</td>
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<td>Lost family</td>
<td>Struggled / fought</td>
<td>Did religious</td>
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<td>Adapted</td>
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<td>Escaped</td>
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<td><strong>How or why they did it</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caring for others understanding the situation</td>
<td>Struggling Work Adaptation Social solidarity</td>
<td>Religious practices and worldview Learning by hardship Agency, self-reliance Understanding the situation / knowledge</td>
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Analysis of words and phrases that can bring [us] closer to the world of the actual storyteller.

Richard Mollica 2006
I would say that those who did such things, they had no knowledge [ah!k-vi!j-jie].

You mean the Khmer Rouge?

Yes. He’s finally dead. In Pol Pot time, I knew many who had no knowledge, and they are worse off than I … Those who were “village chief” — they had really no knowledge [ah!k-vi!j-jie].
They held meetings and they’d ask things and some people would answer – but I understood the situation [jull sa priep ka], so I kept quiet. I adapted [som rap klouen ruh] to the situation to survive at a time when it was difficult to survive.....We never saw them again. We only saw their clothes. The clothes that person had used, were used by someone else.
Words expressing agency/ self reliance

*dto su*

struggle

fight

*prang praeng*

persevere, try again and again

fight to survive, exert, all-out-effort

*rok si dtiang-dtro!ng*

*rok si*: work to eat

*dtiang-dtro!ng*: truthful, honest, upright
Clusters of words

• Social solidarity

• Agency, autonomy, self-reliance

• Religious worldview

❖ Nomos - the cognitive and normative edifice that passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society

Berger 1990/1967: 21
Results: explaining the resilience

- Social solidarity
  gave / received help, find family, care for others, held family and community together

- Agency / self-reliance
  work hard, escape, struggle, persevere, fight

- Religious worldview
  good deeds, religious rituals and practices, did ceremonies, understanding the situation

Culturally accepted coping strategies
Results

They are only words, these Khmer wordplays, but we use them as theory to guide our lives (Sivun Pen)
A habit of belief
It’s good that you survived, you did well
Proposal

Health and social workers:

to contribute to improving the meeting between health workers and war refugees
How to access patients’ cultural and religious explanatory models?
Kinds of questions:

- What do you think about what happened?
- How did you cope with that, how have you managed so well?
- Where did you find the strength?
- What would your grandfather have said?
- How can you tell the kids about this?
Resilience story

I experienced the worst, yet I survived

Because I did this, thought like that, had these values, made these choices,

I survived to be your mother and give you this gift.
How to explain the recovery and normalisation of resilient Cambodian survivors?
Post traumatic survival. The lessons of Cambodian resilience
(2013, forthcoming)

Generating theory, biographical accounts and translation:
A study of trauma and resilience.
International journal of social research methodology,
2011/1

Generosity and resilience. A study in survival
(with Yenn): Refuge 2007 24/1; and in
Sociology at the frontiers of psychology, 2006

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