Life stories of NGO leadership change in Cambodia: from the perspective of transformative learning

Rikio Kimura, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Rationale
This research considers how Cambodian leaders of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in Cambodia change their leadership styles. The deconstruction of the hierarchical social structure within Cambodia as well as the unequal relationship between NGOs and their Northern donors begs more critical and sensible enquiries than a simple question of how NGO leaders change. These sharper enquiries are about how NGO leaders can change (a) towards better serving their clients (i.e., their staff members and/or beneficiaries) and (b) towards relating equally and autonomously with Northern donors rather than reinforcing the dominant structure of the North-South relationship. In other words, how can leaders change in a way that will strengthen their downward accountability rather than their upward accountability?

It appears that in order for Cambodian NGO leaders to change towards strengthening their downward accountability under the hierarchical structures within Cambodia as well as in relation to their Northern donors, they need to transform their perspectives through critical reflection—namely transformative learning.

Transformative learning resulting in behaviour change has the potential to theorise the inside-out change of NGO leaders.

Current Theoretical Thinking: Looking Back, Looking Forward
Looking back at the literature on adult learning for the last twenty years, it is seen that adult learning from the context or informal settings has been attended to (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). An implication of this trend is the need to examine how the social influences adult learning (ibid.). In the arena of transformative learning, there has also been a growing recognition of the need to examine how transformative learning can occur in non-formal education and informal settings (Taylor, 2007) and non-western contexts (ibid.) as well as how the social affects transformative learning (Taylor, 2009). Therefore, this current theoretical thinking legitimises this study, which looks at Cambodian NGO leadership change as transformative learning in informal settings, as timely and forward.

---

1 This research is supported by Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (Start-up) (21830164) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science as well as Academic Research Subsidy from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.
Research Questions
In addition to the main enquiry of how NGO leaders can change towards strengthening downward accountability, given the virtual absence of a leadership model, mainly due to the conflicts and competing concepts between traditional leadership and newcomer western management, NGO leaders are now required to not be simply adaptive to any concept by default but to rather proactively re-construct and practice new models of leadership through transformative learning. Therefore, the overarching research questions are three-fold.

(a) How can NGO leaders change towards better serving their clients?
(b) How can NGO leaders change towards relating equally and autonomously with Northern donors?
(c) How can leaders proactively re-construct and practice new models of leadership?
These questions are broken down into the following sub-set questions in order to describe the process of transformative learning:

(i) What triggered the process of leadership change? (James, 2008)
(ii) How did leaders critically reflect in the process of change?
(iii) How did the social (e.g., family, society) affect the process of change?
(iv) How was the process of change supported?

Epistemological and Methodological Position
Transformative learning is a context dependent and individualistic process (Merizow, 2000). Therefore, my epistemological position is interpretivist, and thus my methodological position is ideographic, in which I ‘seek…to understand individual cases and subjects’ (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005, p. 164) rather than generalisation.

Research and Analytical Methods
I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 key informants, who were familiar with NGO leadership, in order to understand Cambodian NGO leadership and leadership change.

I conducted life story interviews with 13 NGO leaders. Snowball sampling was utilised for selecting the NGO leaders to be interviewed. More specifically, I asked the key informants to nominate well-respected and experienced (at least 2 years as a director or CEO in a NGO) leaders.

I plan to mainly use the thematic analytic method, which is more amenable to a large sample size research like this study (Riessman, 2008). However, the thematic analysis will inevitably leave out structural aspects of the stories, which can richly describe the process of leadership change. To compensate for this, I also plan to apply structural analysis to a few carefully-selected (with some criteria) cases to elaborate how particular leaders actually changed in their specific contexts (Riessman, 2008). More specifically, I plan to use Labov’s analytical method to capture the process of leadership change (sequence of actions) in detail and to observe how a leader made sense of it (Riessman, 2008).

---

2I modified James’ (2008) criteria for selecting exemplary NGO leaders.
Tentative Questions for Roundtable Discussion

- Analysing 13 life histories may be too much. If so, how many is appropriate?
- Is combining thematic and structural analyses going in the right direction?
- How should I combine the findings from the key informant interviews with the findings from the life story interviews?
- How many quotes should I insert into a manuscript when publishing it as a journal article?

References


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 30 June 2010