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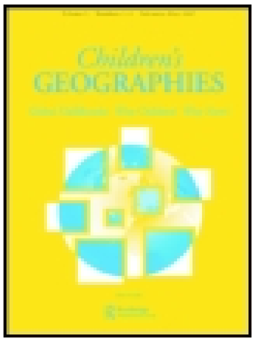

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'Knowledge that moves': emotions and affect in policy and research with young migrants

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ABSTRACT

Migration is an emotional experience, and so is the policy and research work associated with it. Yet, discussions on emotions and affect remain largely absent from the literature on children and youth migration. Writing auto-ethnographically, I revisit my research with/about young Lao migrants with the aim of teasing out how emotions, of young migrants, of my own and in policy making emerged in relation to various dimensions of young people's migration. On this basis I make the case for appreciating emotions as knowledge. While emotions are 'moving' in an affective sense, I proceed by arguing the productive dimension of emotions through the idea of the emotive as 'knowledge that moves'. I substantiate this point by discussing instances in which emotions as a particular form of knowledge 'move' research decisions, policy making processes, theorizing the youthful dimension of migration as well as the interpersonal relations through which ethnographic research is realized.

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Affect; autoethnography; emotions; migration; policy; Southeast Asia; youth

Introduction: emotions as absent presence

Despite recent attention to emotions in migration research (e.g. Conradson and McKay 2007; Svašek 2010; Boccagni and Baldassar 2015), emotions and affect remain characterized by an *absent presence* in research about children, young people and migration. The emotional material making it into published work is too often employed to reinforce representational data. Its potential as a form of knowledge in its own right thus remains unrealized. That includes investigating how emotions might be central to questions about how we know what we know about child and youth migration, its potential for theorizing migration at a young age, and understanding policy making and research as an emotional practice.

The emotional is also distributed unevenly across the concerned literature. In work on children as 'left behind' (e.g. Graham and Jordan 2011), itself an emotion-laden construct, it is often clearly present probably triggered by the very framing of the subject. Yet, it is less well incorporated in work on young people as migrants where the onus is typically on demonstrating their agency in migration (e.g. Huijsmans 2017). Perhaps emotions have featured most prominently in work on young people's experiences of integration, identity work, and sense of belonging in contexts of *im*migration (e.g. Ní Laoire et al. 2011; Sadjad 2016). Yet, this literature is largely limited to research in so-called 'receiving countries' in the Global North (but note for example Hart 2016). In addition, there is little reflection on researching child and youth migration as an emotional process and how emotions shape the research process (but note Punch 2012).

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In this article I make the case for appreciating the emotional as knowledge that has a capacity to move theory building, research practice, and policy and representational work. I do so by unearthing the emotional in three forms of data. First, using auto-ethnography I revisit my own research with young Lao migrants. The auto-ethnographic approach makes visible the emotional experience of conducting research and the various ways in which emotions and affect shape research. In addition, reflecting on a problematic encounter with a young female Lao migrant working in an undocumented manner in Thailand illustrates the richness of emotional encounters for 'knowing migration'. Second, I detail research interactions with migrant youth to shed light on how young migrants perceive migration as an emotional landscape and how they navigate this terrain. Third, I draw on reports and instances of policy making concerning young people's involvement in migration. In an era in which the rationality of scientism, through the idea of 'evidence-based policy' is increasingly driving research agendas towards quantitative approaches and specific methods such as randomized controlled trials, a focus on emotions highlights the 'more-than-rational' dimension of policy making as practice.

On this basis I posit the following claims: (1) Child and youth migration is thick with emotions, and so is intervening upon it be it through research or policy; (2) the emotional opens different registers of knowing children and youth migration; (3) emotions constitute a form of knowledge that has the capacity to move, and (4) attending to this latter dimension helps appreciating both policy making and social science research as more-than-rational activities.

The article is organized as follows: I first briefly survey the theoretical and conceptual debates on emotions and related work on affect. In this, I note to the generational question of adult bodies' affective capacity for knowing children's emotions. I proceed by presenting three cases of emotions following a chronological order, starting with the anxieties of researching in the grey zone, the role of emotions in policy making and knowing migration through emotional encounters with young Lao migrants. I conclude by discussing the emotional as 'knowledge that moves'.

Theorizing emotions

The 2001 editorial by Anderson and Smith (2001) in *Transactions* has become a marker of the reappreciation of the importance of affect and emotions in human geography.[1] Anderson and Smith's editorial stems from a sense of frustration. They see the human world as constructed and lived through emotions. Yet, the emphasis on policy relevant research has increasingly silenced the emotional in social research and public life at large (Anderson and Smith 2001, 7). Anderson and Smith attribute this to 'a gender politics of research' in which 'detachment, objectivity and rationality' are valued and implicitly masculinized while 'engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire' are frequently feminized and seen as clouding vision and impairing judgement (ibid 2001, 7).

Anderson and Smith problematize the binary between 'objective'/'rational' analyses and 'subjective' ones by citing examples which show that these spheres of thought typically interpenetrate (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8). Capturing the emotional better requires approaches to knowledge 'associated with being and doing, with participation and performance, with ways of knowing that depend on direct experience … more so than reflection, abstraction, translation and representation' (ibid 2001, 9). Auto-ethnography strongly grounded in direct experience is therefore well suited to bring out the emotional; a necessary first step towards appreciating the emotional as knowledge.

In a review article on emotions and affect in human geography Steve Pile (2010, 5) discusses three common grounds between the geographies of affect and the geographies of emotions. This is firstly a relational ontology which 'privileges the fluid over the fixed' because emotions move and affect circulates. Second, such a relational ontology 'privileges proximity and intimacy'. Third is a shared preference for ethnography as methodological approach (ibid 2010, 10–11).

Despite these common grounds Pile also notes some important differences between affect and emotions. Emotions, Pile explains, refer to 'expressed feelings, being both conscious and experienced' (Anderson, 2006 in: Pile 2010, 9). Geographers have embraced emotions as a manner to take geographical knowledges beyond the representational (i.e. visual, textual and linguistic domains) by 'recognizing the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing in the broadest sense' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8). Affect on the other hand is 'the medium through which bodies sustain and transform each other' (Woodward and Lea 2010, 157). Affect in this sense is beyond the cognitive; a 'bodily capacity to be affected, and to affect' and thus transpersonal (Pile 2010, 12). This would suggest that affect is a precondition for knowing and appreciating emotions. After all, only affective bodies can be receptive to emotions and only on that basis can we start to think about emotions as knowledge.

Thinking with affect and emotions has not been absent from children's geographies (e.g. Horton and Kraftl 2006; Blazek and Windram-Geddes 2013). Yet, this is largely limited to research with children in the Global North and has not explicitly included reflection on research as an emotional endeavour (but note Zeitlyn 2016). This includes some work on young people in migration (Ní Laoire et al. 2011). For example, Olga Den Besten (2010) draws on immigrant children's emotional attitudes to their neighbourhoods (in Berlin and Paris) to understand how these children's local belonging is shaped by the segregated structure of these cities. Such work is indicative of the potential of emotions in research on child and youth migration. Anderson and Smith state that 'at particular times and in particular places, there are moments where lives are so explicitly lived through pain, bereavement, elation, anger, love and so on that the power of emotional relations cannot be ignored' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 7). The social process of migration is indeed filled with such moments.

So perhaps we need to ask why we do not see more on emotions as a register of knowing in the literature on children and youth as migrants? Especially, in work focusing on the Global South where the involvement of young people in migration is particularly widespread. Perhaps the answer is already alluded to by Anderson and Smith (2001, 8–9) when they note that 'more critical approaches are not necessarily more 'sense'itive'. Work on children and migration in the Global South is a critical literature. It is critical of Eurocentric constructions of childhood and youth and also critical of interventions conceived of over the back of these young migrants (Howard 2014; Huijsmans 2017; Yea 2017). Where emotions enter this literature, it is largely following a pattern identified by Kraftl (2013) of reinforcing 'voice' and 'agency' and their political dimension, rather than working with the emotional to take scholarship further. Yet, such a call also raises questions about adult bodies' affective capacity for knowing children's emotions. Can we really know children's emotions from our generational location as adults? If this 'knowing' would require drawing on representational material to make children and young people's emotions intelligible to adults (be it spoken words, drawings, etc) has not too much gotten lost and do we not, then, remain at some distance from a child-centred perspective on emotions?

Zeitlyn's (2016) work with British Bangladeshi children in London and Sylhet, Bangladesh, goes some way to overcome these challenges. He does so through the sensory experience of smell. Drawing on psychology he posits that the memory of smell lasts longer than visual memories and that 'cue smells give access to file away autobiographical knowledge faster than cue words can do due to a remarkable link between smell and affective reactions', (ibid 2016, 171). The generational question of the affective capacity of adult bodies in knowing children's emotions is thus responded to with psychological theory. 'Cue smells' trigger emotive associations that are deeply stored away and also trigger these emotions much faster than cues of other properties. As such, it might be argued that the epistemological dilemma of whether we can know our childhood experiences from our current generational location as adults is overcome.

Zeitlyn demonstrates this empirically through auto-ethnography. Having spent his own childhood years in Bangladesh, he writes that 'the sensory experience of arriving in Dhaka made me feel calm despite the objective chaos of the place. I felt a sense of belonging as I arrived in Dhaka' (ibid 2016, 171). For his young British Bangladeshi respondents the opposite is the case. Born and raised in London, it is amongst other things through the sensory experience of Bangladesh that they feel out of place (ibid 2016, 173). This leads Zeitlyn to conclude that it is through the emotions triggered by the sensory experience of particular place-specific smells that a deep sense of (not) belonging is experienced. By attending to smell, Zeitlyn 'breaks down the separation between subject and object, between a person and the world around them' (ibid 2016, 172).

The autobiographical element evident in Zeitlyn's work is taken further by Punch (2012). She contributes to the discussion about emotions by turning the spotlight on field research as a highly emotional experience. Her point of departure is that many methodological and ethical accounts of fieldwork are sanitized and have lost the immediacy and emotional impact of the fieldwork (ibid 2012, 86). Distinguishing between field notes (recordings of research observations) and field diaries (reflections on the research experience), she makes the case for opening up the latter. Direct extracts from our field diaries, she argues:

> … capture some of the immediacy of fieldwork which may reassure others that their guilt, apprehension, fears and worries are legitimate, common and even useful experiences. Revealing the hidden struggles of fieldwork may enable researchers to draw on their strengths and not be held back or overly perturbed by their weaknesses as they recognise that many others grapple with similar issues (Punch 2012, 92).

I respond to Zeitlyn and Punch's call for taking emotions seriously through auto-ethnographic writing by returning to my PhD research with young migrants and their families in an ethnic Lao village in rural Laos (Huijsmans 2010). Nearly a decade has passed since conducting this research (2007–09). With time my memory of the content of specific conversations has faded – for that I need to consult my research notes. Yet, some deeply emotional encounters I still remember vividly. In fact, memories of such emotional experiences draw me back into the research and into my notes much more frequently than vice versa. Equally, when revisiting the research village it is on the basis of such shared emotional experiences that follow up research *becomes* possible. It is only thereafter that a factual knowledge of the social history of the village and its residents, which is essential for asking better questions, becomes useful.

Anxieties of research permission

From the very start of my PhD work, autumn 2006, I had been working on research permission. In the absence of a designated office for such purposes in Laos and a clear procedure, I was reliant upon contacts at the National University of Laos (NUoL) and their efforts of sorting things out for me. Even so, when arriving in Laos late May 2007 I was still unclear about how to obtain formal research permission and whether this would be wise at all as is evident from the excerpt below (compare with Turner 2014).[2]

> The day started off really well just when I started doubting whether my research would ever happen … I called Mr X at NUoL. While he was in a meeting when I rang him, he was happy to take the call. According to him the Faculty of Social Sciences had agreed to welcome me as a researcher. This meant that NUoL would recommend the Ministry of Education to grant a research permit for my project. So if I've understood all this correctly, my research permit decision is now in the hand of the Ministry, let's hope for the best. (Extract from research diary[3], 17 July 2007)

A PhD research is a stressful undertaking at any rate and the uncertainty about research permission only added to this. Hence, the entry I wrote when finally a formal letter of permission arrived was one of great relief despite the many serious issues that still remained:

> Yes, I received an email today that I've been granted research permission! What it all means I've yet to find out, but I've an official looking, stamped, letter stating that the faculty of social sciences has approved that I will do research in 'one village' in Vientiane province. The further chain of emails indicated that this needs to be done under direct supervision of Lao authorities (and that I would be responsible for the costs this incurred). Anyway, a good piece of progress. (Extract research diary 2 August, 2007)

I quickly learnt that this permission was only a halfway house. My research might have been approved by the Ministry of Education, yet; it was ultimately the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was to decide about my research status. My contacts at NUoL, however, suggested I should not wait for this, as it might take a long time. Instead, I was advised to just get the field research started while awaiting full research permission.

With the help of a local organization and the stamped letter of the Ministry of Education I managed to get access to a study village. I was quite aware I was working in the grey zone, and worse, on a topic that was considered highly delicate; migration by children and youth. My research became a delicate balancing act between reporting about my work to various authorities (from village to university) in order to avoid any suspicion while at the same time never going into too much detail:

> Since I want to keep NUoL in the loop I visited the Faculty of Social Sciences today. I found that Prof Y was out of country and is not returning till November … I guess he's probably been away for a while (hence no responses to my emails). Instead I visited Mr X … I briefly explained about my connection with the local organisation as well as the idea of doing research in *Baan Naam*. I kept it deliberately vague and promised to get back in touch once I had more information (extract from research diary, 3 October 2007)

In the research village (*Baan Naam*) in which I started working in October 2007 I employed a similar strategy. I accepted the village head's (*naaibaan*) offer to stay in his house when in the village so that he could easily check upon my work. I also did so to mitigate possible risks for my respondents whom effectively participated in a less than fully lawful activity. By staying at his house I implicated, to some degree, the *naaibaan* into the research. This way, I gambled he would be more likely to protect the research project and thereby the research participants if need be.

My clear association with village authorities affected the knowledge production. It granted first-hand access to observing the working of the state at village level. Some of this was highly relevant to my research, for example, when young villagers dropped by to request the village head's approval as part of applying for a border pass.[4] No doubt there was also a cost. Quite likely, my association with village authorities was the reason why some (young) villagers were very reluctant to share with me their cross-border experiences, especially since most of it went through undocumented channels.

An even more fundamental compromise to the research stemming from the constant fear of working without full research permission was that I was keen to never overplay my hand. For the ethnographic research project I had in mind, periods of extended stay in the village would have been ideal. Yet because I did not want to overstay my welcome I decided not to push things and settled for regular (initially weekly, then biweekly) short visits of a few nights.

In spite of these precautions, feelings of anxiety stayed with me throughout. I avoided asking questions of a political nature that could jeopardize the research, even if this meant not following through on seemingly important topics emerging in conversations. At the same time, I was always on my toes when being questioned myself, never sure why certain questions were asked:

> Myself and my two research assistants were invited for dinner, a few houses down the road from the *naaibaan's* house (who didn't join us). We were welcomed with *lao lao* [alcoholic drink] and green looking *laap paa dip* [raw fish salad]. A group of around 6–7 men sat on the bed while a woman roasted some small fish. After the initial exchange of information, and with the pouring of alcohol, the conversation took the form of an interview. But for the first time it was myself who the questions were fired at. Initially about my research: why youth, why Laos, and why *Baan Naam*? More or less satisfied with the answers I gave, the questions moved on to politics: My opinion about democracy, Laos's one party system, and whether the situation in Laos was better or worse than elsewhere [especially Thailand]. I tried to deal with the questions as diplomatically as possible. Yet, I was clearly put on the spot when one man said 'is it because you have to leave the country if you say something about the one-party system that you answer like this?'. Later on the discussion moved back to my research. They asked to share some initial findings. Again, they demanded that I attached value judgments to these observations (which I tried to resist, and tried to explain that this was not my intention). Disqualifying my explanation they commented that I should not write anything negative about Laos and *Baan Naam* since that would certainly affect the country/village negatively (extract from research diary, 28 November 2007)

I assume that in most cases feelings of anxiety decrease as the research project progresses. The opposite was the case for my research. Since I did not fancy the prospect of being allocated a Lao partner as a minder during my research (something that was part of the package of formal research permission) I never followed up on my application at the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even when senior Lao academic colleagues offered to do so on my behalf. Without formal research permission the chance remained that my research could suddenly be terminated. Particularly towards the end of the research this became a haunting image as I had already invested so much time and resources into the research that I was in no position emotionally, financially, and academically to restart the project elsewhere.

Emotions in the Lao child migration debate

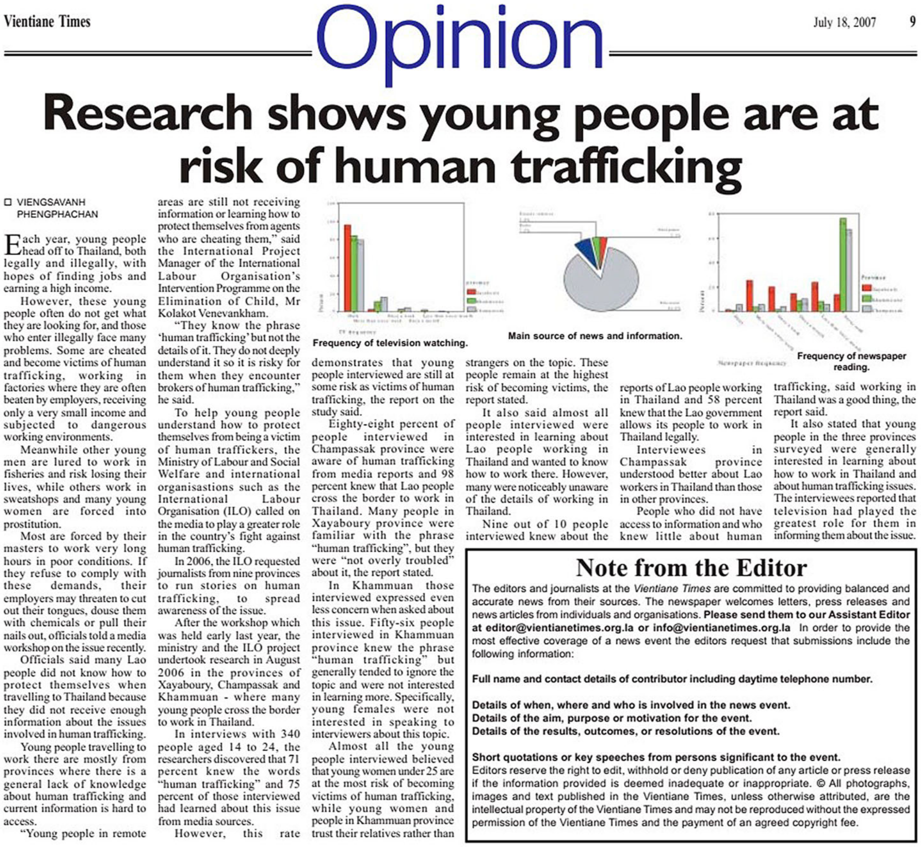
At first glance, there appears little space for the emotional in policy making in contemporary Laos. The current bureaucracy was built up during the period of high-socialism (1975-mid 1980s) and large numbers of high-ranking civil servants still in office today were trained abroad in fellow socialist countries. Perhaps more so than in countries without such socialist pasts, there is great emphasis placed on quantitative scientific rationality, resulting in a preference for disembodied data in formal justifications of policy interventions. This is evident from the state-censored English language daily the *Vientiane Times* which often reduces deeply embodied experiences such as poverty, resettlement, and migration to disembodied figures. Such figures are then mobilized to legitimate rational policy responses.

A 2007 ‘opinion’ article by Phengphachan (2007) serves as the case in point (see Picture 1 below). The article starts by framing the phenomenon of young Lao nationals leaving for Thailand to work in terms of migration: ‘Each year young people head off to Thailand, both legally and illegally, with hopes of finding jobs and earning a high income’. Next it lists a number of common problems these young migrants often face, which, according to unnamed Lao officials can be mitigated if these young migrants would know better ‘how to protect themselves’. The solution presented for solving this problem does not quite follow the prelude: more information about human trafficking. This policy suggestion is *made* scientific and put beyond question by stating and visualizing a range of figures generated through a survey asking young people whether and how they had heard about the phrase ‘human trafficking’ and knew what it meant (Picture 1).

The visuals are nearly impossible to read in both the electronic and printed version of the article. Equally, the rationality derived from the figures presented in text is questionable. For example, the article states that ‘eighty-eight percent of the people interviewed in Champassak were aware of human trafficking from media reports’, and also that ‘many people in Xayaboury province were familiar with the phrase “human trafficking”, but they were “not overly troubled” about it’. Such ‘facts’ hardly suggest that there is a need for anti-trafficking information as the article argues. However, I hesitate to put these contradictions down to incompetence or technological shortcomings. Rather, I would suggest that it is the presence of diagrams and figures that matters, less so whether they support the policy proposals.

Disembodied figures and diagrams are not just important for what they say, they also play a performative role in policy making as practice. They are important ingredients in the ritual of scientific, rational policy making, and as such more than mere ‘evidence’. This was illustrated in a policy workshop on young people as migrants that I attended. The presentation of research findings of a quantitative kind is a near standard ingredient to such meetings, but so is the public and more private sharing of (qualitative) anecdotes. Whereas the former is typically presented in an objective and disembodied way with ample attention to sampling procedure and statistical representation of the findings, the latter lacks all this as these are typically stories about distant cousins of workshop participants. Yet, it is often these latter knowledges that move and lead participants to argue for more urgency in implementing particular interventions.

The interaction between the abstractly rational and the deeply emotional is also evidently at work in Non-governmental and Inter-governmental Organizations’ publications about the phenomenon of minors involved in migration. A UNICEF and MoLSW (2004) sponsored study (published with MoLsW) on child trafficking is in the preface of the report heralded as ‘the first national survey of its kind in Lao PDR’. The objective scientific approach is further stressed in the methodology section



Vientiane Times **Opinion** July 18, 2007 9

Research shows young people are at risk of human trafficking

☐ VIENGSAVANH PHENGPHACHAN

Each year, young people head off to Thailand, both legally and illegally, with hopes of finding jobs and earning a high income.

However, these young people often do not get what they are looking for, and those who enter illegally face many problems. Some are cheated and become victims of human trafficking, working in factories where they are often beaten by employers, receiving only a very small income and subjected to dangerous working environments.

Meanwhile other young men are lured to work in fisheries and risk losing their lives, while others work in sweatshops and many young women are forced into prostitution.

Most are forced by their masters to work very long hours in poor conditions. If they refuse to comply with these demands, their employers may threaten to cut out their tongues, douse them with chemicals or pull their nails out, officials told a media workshop on the issue recently.

Officials said many Lao people did not know how to protect themselves when travelling to Thailand because they did not receive enough information about the issues involved in human trafficking.

Young people travelling to work there are mostly from provinces where there is a general lack of knowledge about human trafficking and current information is hard to access.

"Young people in remote areas are still not receiving information or learning how to protect themselves from agents who are cheating them," said the International Project Manager of the International Labour Organisation's Intervention Programme on the Elimination of Child, Mr Kolakot Venevankham.

"They know the phrase 'human trafficking' but not the details of it. They do not deeply understand it so it is risky for them when they encounter brokers of human trafficking," he said.

To help young people understand how to protect themselves from being a victim of human traffickers, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and international organisastions such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) called on the media to play a greater role in the country's fight against human trafficking.

In 2006, the ILO requested journalists from nine provinces to run stories on human trafficking, to spread awareness of the issue.

After the workshop which was held early last year, the ministry and the ILO project undertook research in August 2006 in the provinces of Xayaboury, Champassak and Khammuan - where many young people cross the border to work in Thailand.

In interviews with 340 people aged 14 to 24, the researchers discovered that 71 percent knew the words "human trafficking" and 75 percent of those interviewed had learned about this issue from media sources.

However, this rate demonstrates that young people interviewed are still at some risk as victims of human trafficking, the report on the study said.

Eighty-eight percent of people interviewed in Champassak province were aware of human trafficking from media reports and 98 percent knew that Lao people cross the border to work in Thailand. Many people in Xayaboury province were familiar with the phrase "human trafficking", but they were "not overly troubled" about it, the report stated.

In Khammuan those interviewed expressed even less concern when asked about this issue. Fifty-six people interviewed in Khammuan province knew the phrase "human trafficking" but generally tended to ignore the topic and were not interested in learning more. Specifically, young females were not interested in speaking to interviewers about this topic.

Almost all the young people interviewed believed that young women under 25 are at the most risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, while young women and people in Khammuan province trust their relatives rather than strangers on the topic. These people remain at the highest risk of becoming victims, the report stated.

It also said almost all people interviewed were interested in learning about Lao people working in Thailand and wanted to know how to work there. However, many were noticeably unaware of the details of working in Thailand.

Nine out of 10 people interviewed knew about the reports of Lao people working in Thailand and 58 percent knew that the Lao government allows its people to work in Thailand legally.

Interviewees in Champassak province understood better about Lao workers in Thailand than those in other provinces.

People who did not have access to information and who knew little about human trafficking, said working in Thailand was a good thing, the report said.

It also stated that young people in the three provinces surveyed were generally interested in learning about how to work in Thailand and about human trafficking issues. The interviewees reported that television had played the greatest role for them in informing them about the issue.

Frequency of television watching.

Main source of news and information.

Frequency of newspaper reading.

Note from the Editor

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Full name and contact details of contributor including daytime telephone number.

Details of when, where and who is involved in the news event.
Details of the aim, purpose or motivation for the event.
Details of the results, outcomes, or resolutions of the event.

Short quotations or key speeches from persons significant to the event.
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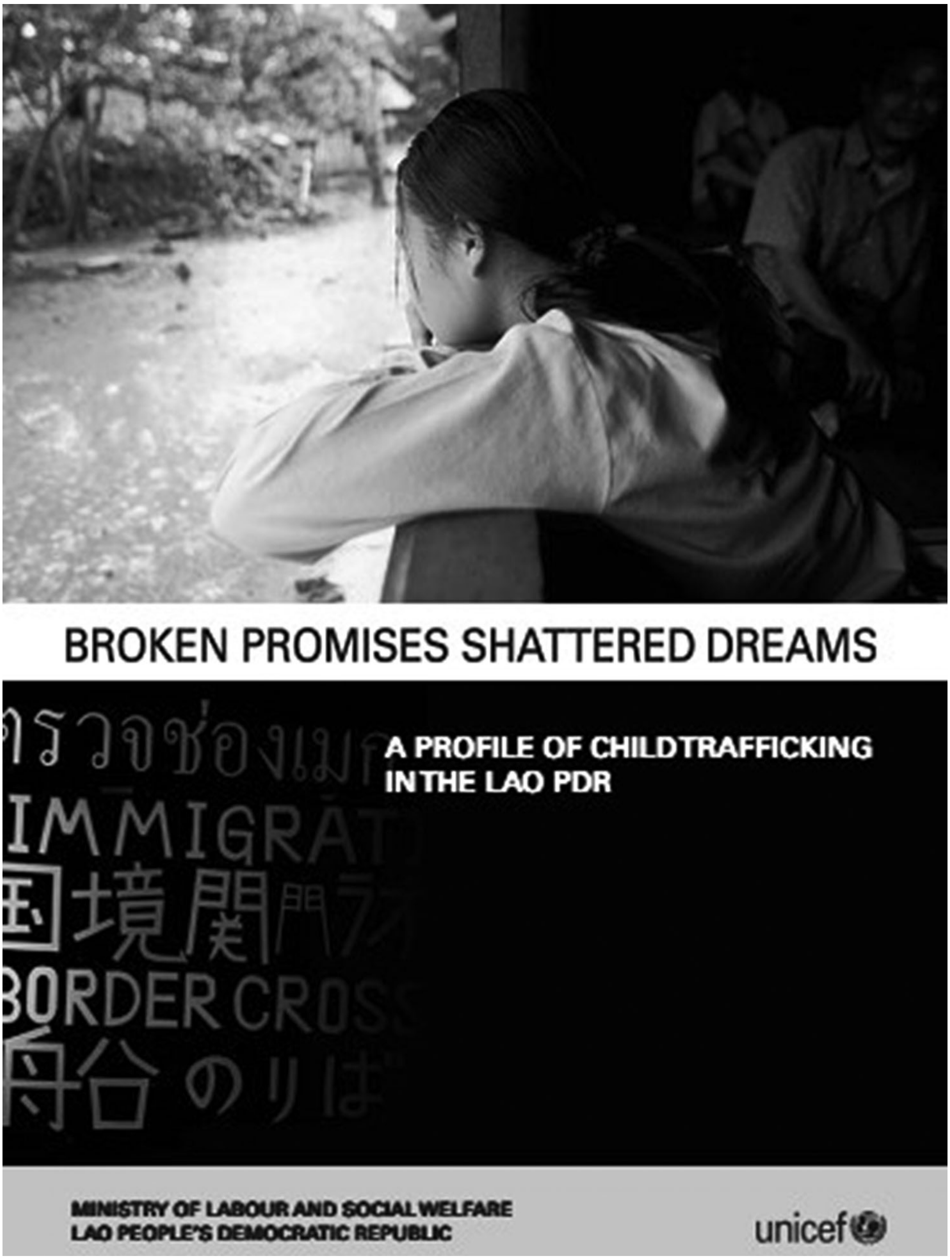
Picture 1. Vientiane Times article on human trafficking.

where the study is described as 'comprehensive' because it 'included all provinces of the Lao PDR with the exception of Saysomboune Special Zone' (UNICEF and MoLSW 2004, 15). Nonetheless, the implied scientific rigour is wedded to a highly emotive and suggestive title and image appearing boldly on the cover page (see Picture 2 below). Further, the subtitle *A profile of child trafficking in the Lao PDR* suggests a definitive focus on children. In a report targeting an adult audience, adding 'child' to the already emotive construct of 'trafficking' works to mobilize an additional set of emotions. Yet, a close reading informs that out of the 253 'victims' interviewed '63% were under 18 years of age [no further age-disaggregation provided], 33% were between 19 and 29 years of age, and 4% were 30 and above' (UNICEF and MoLSW 2004, 18).

I would suggest it is the emotive that gives reports such as these the capacity to move public opinion. The scientific approach at best provides the context in which this moving takes place and at worst might be in conflict with the emotional appeal as the point on age-disaggregated data illustrates (Picture 2).

Encountering emotions in research with young migrants

I now turn to emotions in research with young female migrants. The material I draw on stems from the ethnographic research project I alluded to above. The fieldwork took place between 2007 and 2009 with children and youth from a predominantly ethnic Lao village in central Laos, and included following some of the young migrants to their destinations in urban Laos and across the border in



BROKEN PROMISES SHATTERED DREAMS

A PROFILE OF CHILDTRAFFICKING
IN THE LAO PDR

MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL WELFARE
LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

unicef

Picture 2. Front cover UNICEF and MoLSW (2004) report.

Thailand. The research focused on young people in their second and third decade of life, including both young men and young women (for further details see: Huijsmans 2010). The migrations these young people got involved in were initially typically short-distance, short-time, and tended to become further distance, longer term as young people became more experienced migrants or left through formal migrant recruiting companies to southern Thailand. Here I draw on encounters with young female migrants only because I am able to complement research material at origin with material obtained at destination (I did not succeed in following young male migrants to destination). I revisit this material with a simply question in mind: where and how did emotions surface in my research on child and youth migration and what did it do?

Yaan het bô dai: leaving the village as more-than-rational

The literature on migration frequently reduces the analysis of migration-decisions to the rational realm, typically through the language of cost–benefit. To be sure, rational considerations matter and the young migrants I worked with often justified their decisions to leave in precisely such terms. They would refer to limited employment opportunities in the village, higher wages elsewhere, or simply the chance to acquire skills by entering non-agricultural work beyond the village. However, especially in relation to youth often more is at stake. For example, one young female migrant (16–17 years) explained her desire to leave the village for migrant work in the Lao capital Vientiane because 'it was no fun staying in *Baan Naam* since most of her friends were working elsewhere' (Huijsmans 2014, 298). This peer aspect is important. It illuminates a youth specific motivation to migration; something that rational cost–benefit considerations fail to capture.

Mary Beth Mills' (1999) work on female youth leaving rural northeastern Thailand for factory work in Bangkok makes a firm case for appreciating more-than-rational dimensions in youthful migration-decisions. She writes in this regard about young people's aspiration for being 'up-to-date' (*thansamay*). Young villagers realize this through factory work in Bangkok which allows them to participate in particular constructions of Thai modernity. The idea of *thansamay* is first-and-foremost a feeling and like the peer dimension discussed above it contributes something distinctly youthful to understanding the widespread involvement of young people in migration.

My work in the Lao village of *Baan Naam* affirms the presence of emotions in young people's decisions to migrate. This is captured by the phrase *yaan het bô dai*. The phrase emerged literally in separate discussions with two young female migrants, and resonated in research encounters with several other young female migrants. Let me illustrate this with the examples of Padu and Oy. Padu is a first-born child (with three younger siblings) of a teacher couple. She left *Baan Naam* upon completing her secondary education at the age of 19 to start a health workers course in Vientiane. Since Padu did not have relatives in Vientiane, she stayed with a family she was not related to. In return for board and lodging she kept their house and helped out in their small riverside restaurant. Oy is the fifth born (out of seven) and was already out of school for some years when she left the village for the first time at 17 or 18 years of age for migrant work in a popular Mekong site restaurant in Vientiane.

For both girls, leaving the village for urban Vientiane was an aspiration and something that excited them. It must also be seen in relation to the opportunity structures shaping the rural female life course. Padu had exhausted the educational options within the district, and coming from a better-off family she was able to move to Vientiane for further studies. For Oy, migration was a way to extend her youth. Remaining in the village probably would have led to an early marriage. In Mills' terms, Vientiane also was certainly regarded as more 'up-to-date' and these girls were looking forward to participate in this Lao version of modernity. However, the expression *yaan het bô dai* complicates the aspirational dimension of youth migration in an important way. It literally means 'afraid that one is unable [cannot] do something'. Padu, for example, in recalling her migration decision explained that she had never really stayed in Vientiane before. She had visited some markets and some festivals but staying and studying there she considered quite a different matter, particularly because she was well aware that others would regard her as a *khon baan nok* (country bumpkin).

The identity construct of *khon baan nok* is an urban construct imposed on those from outside the city (literally: 'people from the village outside'). At a young age children do not identify themselves as *khon baan nok*. They consider themselves a member of their family, of the village, and of the Lao nation-state (*khon Lao*) – typically in this order. *Khon baan nok* as an identity construct is something most rural youth encounter as they enter their teenage years. It is in this lifephase that they increasingly come to view their village, rural upbringing, rural life, rural schooling and rural traits as inferior to the urban Laos and Thai standards they are exposed to through media, through actual visits to Vientiane and Thailand, and through development discourse that presents the rural as a place that lacks development and civilization (for an excellent discussion on this theme see Morarji 2016).

The expression *yaan het bô dai* is rooted in a self-identification of *khon baan nok*. Migration for shorter or longer periods of time to urban Laos or into Thailand becomes an avenue to overcome this singular rural identity and prove oneself as able to handle the peculiarities of modern life. Yet, this aspiration is pregnant with fear and doubt. Will I be able to do it? Will I fit in? Will people at destination respect me for who I am? Dealing with these emotions successfully means finding one's place at destination without having to give up one's rural roots. Padu and Oy both accomplished this. They regularly return to the village and blend in with ease while they also acted confidently at their destinations in Vientiane when I visited them there. *Yaan het bô dai* carries, however, also other possible outcomes. While it stimulates young people to overcome their fear and silence their self-doubt it also holds an easy exit option. That is, resigning to one's rural fate. Some young migrants indeed returned to the village within days declaring that urban life was not what they had expected while glorifying village life. Another option is the erasure of their rural identity. This latter option seems however, more prominent in popular representations of youth migration (Huijsmans 2011) than in empirical accounts were hybrid identities are more common (Mills 1999).

Tears in migration: knowing migration through emotions

At the outset, my PhD research was designed as a multi-sited project aimed at following the young villagers to their migration destinations. In practice, following proved more difficult than anticipated and was only realized in a number of instances. One such case was Khik, a second born child out of five who first migrated for work at the age of 17. She first worked for some months in the same riverside restaurant as Oy (mentioned above). Her next migration experience took her to Thailand together with a younger sister (third born) and two other girls from the village – a migration facilitated by a broker.

Khik ended up working as a nanny and domestic worker for a family in the northeastern Thai city of Udon Thani. The middle-class Thai family ran a vet-clinic where the adult couple worked. Khik's work was supervised by the elderly parents of this couple and much of her work consisted of looking after the couple's small child. Following numerous telephone conversations with Khik my female research assistant managed to organize a meeting with Khik in the immediate neighbourhood of her place of work:

> When we meet her [Khik] she explained that she had gained permission from the grandmother to meet her 'cousin from her village' (first author's research assistant). Khik arrived at our meeting together with the young girl [she was nannying], since the girl had insisted on coming along. Although Khik claims that the grandmother was aware of the little girl joining her, we met a furious grandmother when we walked Khik back to the gate after an interview which lasted about thirty minutes. The grandmother claimed that she had been looking for the little girl everywhere and feared that she had been kidnapped. We listened to the grandmother [verbally] abusing Khik; she accused her of irresponsible behaviour for taking the girl out of the gate (which Khik afterwards explained she did frequently), and she threatened to report Khik to the Thai police for staying in Thailand illegally. Khik, in tears, uttered apologies, and the research assistant tried to explain the situation to the grandmother but with little success; we had to leave Khik behind.
>
> When we later got in touch with Khik by telephone and referred back to the incident, she insisted that we should not worry. She explained that this was simply how the grandmother was; from time to time she got mad without reason. Furthermore, when we suggested that she may want to leave this employer she disagreed because she had just been promised a rise in salary.
>
> Excerpt from Huijsmans and Baker (2012, 932)

This research encounter was troubling in many respects, no doubt most seriously for Khik. For these reasons I long considered it an instance of 'research failure' that I best kept quiet about perhaps in part because of the condition of self-doubt characterizing many PhD researchers and certainly myself. It is only in more recent years that I have come to embrace 'failures' as knowledge. Precisely because this research encounter was so unsettling, raw and emotional, it provided an insight in migration I could not have obtained otherwise, and experiencing this together with my research assistant facilitated a much better joint understanding of the issue we were working on. Having met Khik in *Baan Naam* in her wooden house with plaited bamboo mats as walls, and seeing her some time later in a modern kitchen full of electric appliances in a concrete, air-conditioned house in urban Thailand offers a perspective on what migration means for these young villagers that can only partly be captured through words. Having spent considerable amount of time in Khik's rural home village, this modern environment in which I now encountered Khik made me view her body as out of place. The environment marked her body as distinctly rural. It made her skin look darker than it actually was. It made her hair-style look more rural than it probably was. Most striking were her feet and legs. In shorts and flipflops, Khik's calves and feet were clearly visible. Her rural roots were written on this part of her body. Having spent many days in the fields and in muddy paddies had given her feet a thick skin that now started to show some cracks and had left scars on her calves.

Her differently marked body signified her as the 'other' in this household. Given the colour-coded Lao-Thai society and the social value attributed to the modern (High 2004) her embodied otherness was one of a lower social quality, less smooth, less sophisticated. Carrying out more lowly valued domestic work (Muttarak 2004), but also the abusive treatment we observed become more possibly because of this marked bodily difference. Equally, the bodily markers that set me apart as a western foreigner meant that I was welcomed into this private home and was never questioned about my status. These very different bodily markers of migrantness both Khik and myself were proud to have partially overcome just minutes before when meeting casually over a few softdrinks at an Udon Thani roadside café. We celebrated what we had in common; knowing a particular village on the Lao side of the border and many of its residents. We were wrong of course, as we both stood out in this urban Thai space. For Khik this worked to reinforce her social status of an undocumented migrant domestic worker subject to the whims of her employer, for me this reinforced my white male adult privilege free to roam these Thai cities even if this included intimate conversations with significantly younger girls who were so clearly products of markedly different socio-economic, cultural and political histories.

Through later telephone conversations between my research assistant and Khik, it appeared that for Khik the event had been a usual one. She stressed that she was frequently subject to such abuse but also added that soon after her employer would give her a bonus, according to Khik, to avoid her leaving the job. Nonetheless, upon reflecting on this incident with my research assistant we decided not to meet any further young (un)documented Lao migrants in Thailand despite the richness of the encounter. Unsure how precisely our visit had affected Khik, yet realizing that we were unable to resolve this incident while part of the scene we decided it to be more ethical to avoid such encounters in the future.

This emotional research encounter had the capacity to move us towards a more ethical research practice and a better understanding of the lived experience of youth migration. Yet, it also circulated affective flows in research relations back in *Baan Naam*. This generated a level of rapport that was previously not there and which greatly enriched our research with Khik's father back in the village. When we informed him about our visit to his daughter in Thailand he was very keen to learn more and beamed with pride when we described her work environment. To our surprise he said he was very glad to hear Khik had achieved so much. He then recollected Khik's early childhood. How, at a young age, the girl had fallen seriously ill and nearly died. After this narrow escape Khik had always been a bit different from other girls. Hearing that she had now found a paying job outside the village, which even allowed her to remit money to her poor parents was something he had never expected his daughter to be capable of.

Conclusion: the emotional as 'knowledge that moves'

It is no surprise that young migrants perceive migration as an emotional landscape. It remains puzzling therefore that this dimension has received so little attention in work on child and youth migration in the Global South – a part of the world where migration at a young age is common. Anderson and Smith's (2001, 8–9) observation of nearly two decades ago that more 'critical approaches' are not necessarily more sensitive to the emotional appears still holding true today. However, the emotional is not only relevant in understanding young migrants' experiences of migration, it also illuminates dimensions of research and policy work on child and youth migration that have thus far received too little attention.

In this article I have made the case for appreciating the emotional as 'knowledge that moves'. This is true in the affective sense – of course. Yet I have argued that emotions also move the theorization of migration at a young age, the representational work of young migrants in policy discourse, and research practices. Too often theory work on migration at a young age is not sufficiently sensitive to its generational dimension. Attending to how young migrants perceive the migration landscape in emotional ways brings us closer to a distinctly youthful theorization of migration as I have illustrated in this article by zooming in on the emotional utterance of *yaan het bô dai*. Further, the research encounter with Khik was both deeply problematic and highly insightful. Precisely because this research encounter was so unsettling, raw and emotional, it constitutes an understanding of youth migration that representational data at best can only capture in part. Unearthing such knowledge and having it move our theory work is best done, I would suggest, by writing auto-ethnographically while staying close to direct experiences – however uncomfortable they might have been. Writing auto-ethnographically also avoids overplaying one's hand. After all, epistemological questions remain about adult bodies' affective capacity to truly know other people's emotions, especially of those in a different generational, gendered, etc social location.

In relation to policy and research work I have stressed the continued role of the more-than-rational dimension. This is an important point to make in an era in which the rationality of scientism, through the idea of 'evidence-based policy', is increasingly influencing how we conduct research, write about it as well as how we think about policy making (but note Mosse 2004). The policy material that I have presented indicates that representational material in the form of emotive titles, cover pictures, or anecdotes may well have a greater capacity to move action for and in interventions than disembodied scientific facts. In terms of research practice the capacity of emotions to move is even larger. As I have illustrated on the basis of excerpts from my research diary, the anxieties of conducting research without full research permission led to a number of research decisions that affected the knowledge production in substantial ways. Equally, it was through the emotional encounter with Khik that I came to rethink the ethics of my research in important ways. And, becoming emotionally invested in the research generated affective flows through which deeper levels of rapport were realized, something that is essential for ethnographic research, as illustrated through the case of Khik's father. Appreciating the emotional as 'knowledge that moves' is thus a twofold call. It is about treating the emotional as knowledge in its own right and about teasing out how it 'moves' action, understanding and representational work.

Notes

1. A reappreciation, because it builds on earlier work on emotions and affect in the humanist geographies of the 1970s and 1980s and the psychoanalytic geographies of the 1990s (Pile 2010, 5).
2. Marise Lachapelle (2008) claims that prior to 2008 Lao authorities did not issue research visas at all. She argues further that foreign researchers would typically resort to doing research illegally on the basis of a tourist visa or getting a work visa first and on that basis trying to obtain official researcher status (compare with High 2014).
3. In contrast with Samantha Punch I did not keep a separate field diary next to field notes. It took about five month from arriving in Laos till getting access to my eventual field site. During this period I kept a research diary and since there was hardly any 'field research' to report there was no need for starting a separate

document. In later stages of the research my diary entries became more like 'field notes' yet remained written as diary entries.

4. A border pass is a relatively cheap and easily obtained travel document with which Lao villagers can cross the border into Thailand and travel within the border district on the Thai side for a limited period of time.

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