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Erin Michelle Kamler


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Negotiating Narratives of Human Trafficking: NGOs, Communication and the Power of Culture

Erin Michelle Kamler

This article draws on interviews with anti-trafficking NGO employees in Thailand to illustrate the use of narratives as a tool for communicating cultural values. Drawing on theories of modernization, culture, and liberation psychology, I assess the way anti-trafficking NGO employees construct narratives, or “stories,” about human trafficking. These narratives rely on Western values associated with modernization, the role of NGOs in development, gendered constructions of victimhood, “Othering,” and Orientalism. Analyzing these narratives, I build a theory of “culture as a space of safety;” a self-reinforcing mechanism whereby employees ritualistically retreat from the overwhelming circumstances they confront in their work.

Keywords: Culture; Identity; Intercultural Communication; Organizational Communication; International Communication; Thailand; Trafficking

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In recent decades, an international movement has sprung up dedicated to the eradication of human trafficking (Farr, 2005). The U.S. Department of State, a leader in this movement, has identified the Mekong Sub-Region (an area that comprises Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Yunnan China, and Burma) as one of the primary source, transit, and destination regions of the world for trafficking (Bertone, 2008; U.S. Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons Report, 2010). While both local and international anti-trafficking Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), are responding to this issue in collaboration with state and civil society actors, few studies have addressed the way NGO employees narrate the problem of trafficking. Such narratives are significant because NGOs, particularly those funded by and based in Western...
countries such as the United States, often serve a “diplomatic” role in the developing world, communicating the problems and realities of the developing society to Western audiences. As such, NGOs act as “information brokers,” making the developing world legible to the West (Sulaiman, 2009). This, in turn, has implications for international policy.

Thus, this study sought to assess how anti-trafficking NGO employees in Thailand construct narratives, or “stories,” about human trafficking. While largely offered as a way of “speaking for” trafficking survivors and their experiences (Segrave, Pickering, & Milivojevic, 2009) I found that the narratives the employees used were, in fact, influenced by an array of cultural concerns. They included a Civilizing narrative (“Thailand is backwards”), a Moralizing narrative (“Thailand is unethical”), a Savior narrative (“They should be grateful”), an Othering narrative (“Thailand is illegible to the West”), and a Victim narrative (“Sex workers lack agency”). Together, these narratives reinforced cultural assumptions about modernization in a particular development sequence—the idea that humans “progress” along a linear cultural trajectory as industrialization and economic development occur—as well as a “self-versus-other” binary based on ideas about the Orient and the West. This study was designed to pave the way toward future research exploring larger questions regarding the “constructed” nature of the anti-trafficking movement.

Drawing on theories of modernization in development, culture in international relations, and liberation psychology, I discuss my interviews with anti-trafficking NGO employees in Bangkok and Chiang Mai to illustrate how these narratives create a “space of safety” for the employees as they navigate their work activities.

Prior Research

Anti-Trafficking Narratives and the Role of NGOs

Scholars conducting research on trafficking have turned their focus to the strategies used by those in the anti-trafficking movement to promote their cause. Parreñas (2011) explored the structural constraints that limit the choices and autonomy of non-trafficked Filipina migrant hostesses in Japan and questioned the binaries of “choice” and “consent” commonly employed in anti-trafficking policies. Segrave et al. (2009) discussion of legalistic approaches to anti-trafficking policy generated important arguments about the need for pro-rights approaches to anti-trafficking agendas. Doezema (2000) explored the rhetorical construction of the “victim” narrative in anti-trafficking discourse. Soderlund (2011) examined the “revelations” of male journalists who researched the problem of trafficking around the world and who enacted styles of reporting that positioned them as heroic authority figures. Pollack (2007) critiqued the anti-trafficking movement’s policies and their effects on sex workers on the ground. While these studies illustrated important problems with the methodology of advocates working in the Trafficking In Persons “space,” they did not specifically address the narratives used by NGO employees.
Scholars studying the role of NGOs in development have been similarly engaged in disentangling the complexities involved in the communication processes of these institutions. Of particular relevance is Suzuki’s (1998) study articulating the cultural and structural issues and conflicts commonly faced by NGO administrative staff and field officers working on the ground. Eyben and Napier-Moore (2008) explored the way Western NGOs (and development discourse, in general) adopt a neoliberal framework as development actors promote “investing in” women, in effect, commodifying the discourse around human rights. Lindenberg and Bryant (2001) explored the history and role of NGOs in development, explaining the importance of the efforts of NGOs to create “compelling new visions to motivate staff and donors” as part of their organizational cultures (p. 22). Together, these and other studies pointed to the importance of research on how NGO employees narrate the goals of their work experiences and perceptions about the roles of NGOs in development.

Few studies, however, have connected these areas of research by examining NGO employee narratives about human trafficking from the perspective of culture. Interpreting such narratives through the lens of culture is important for, as Carey (1989) has explained, the study of culture offers us a way to “understand the meanings that others have placed on experience” (p. 61). Thus, the present research works to advance the important claims made by scholars critiquing the anti-trafficking movement, as well as those engaged in understanding NGOs’ roles in development.

**Conceptualizing Culture**

Post-colonial cultural theories, particularly those of Orientalism (Said, 1979) and Othering (Barkawi & Laffey, 2002; Blaney & Inayatullah, 2004; Hobson, 2007), inform the framework of this study. Orientalism, according to Said, is “a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (p. 6). This investment, he explained, manifests in three primary structures that benefit from their relative hegemonic power relationships with the East: academia (Westerners writing and teaching about the East), general/geographical (perpetuating institutionalized notions of the Orient versus the Occident), and corporate (a style of dominance managed through institutional discourses about the East) (p. 3). Understanding the dynamics of Orientalism as a process of objectification of the East by members of the West, informs my questions about the cultural underpinnings of Western NGO narratives about the problem of trafficking in Thailand.

Blaney and Inayatullah (2004) explained that Christian narratives informed the thought of colonizers of the New World. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian Europeans viewed “difference” as being parallel to a “fall from God’s grace” on the part of the Other, who belonged to a “lower rung” on the linear chain of human evolution (p. 49). Such colonial narratives have echoes in the present study of NGO employee narratives, which evoke similar notions of difference between the United States and Thailand.
Modernization theory offers another useful frame. International Relations scholars Inglehart and Welzel (2005) and Maxfield (2002) theorized that socioeconomic development impacts cultural change by bringing bureaucratization, secularization, and an “increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-expression” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, p. 25). These scholars’ view of modernization theory proposes a path toward development in which the cultural values of democracy, freedom, and human rights (i.e., Western values) result from economic development. NGOs in the developing world take their cue from modernization theory, as their purpose centers on promoting progress-oriented, Enlightenment-born values of human rights, emancipation, and individual agency (Fisher, 1997; Ganesh, 2003; Segrave, 2009; Segrave et al., 2009). Here I seek to re-define modernization theory as a cultural value in and of itself.

Scholarship in liberation psychology also offers an important framework for this study. Watkins and Shulman (2008), drawing from the work of Martin-Baro (1994), analyzed the psychological underpinnings of narrative creation. Unpacking the human experience of trauma, they postulated that narrative frameworks shape our understanding of the world, often unconsciously. It is only through dialogue that we may become aware of our narrative frameworks and, in so doing, “open up possibilities for evolution and transformation” (p. 141). The authors explained that some narrative frames open individuals up to broader possibilities while other frames “create information hierarchies where interaction is highly limited and compartmentalized” (p. 142). By allowing cultural values to influence their narratives of trafficking, the NGO employees engaged in such “information hierarchies,” privileging their own perceptions and insights over those of the culture in which they worked.

Method

Interviews, conducted in English and Thai, took place over four weeks during the summer of 2011 in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, with NGO staff working at multiple levels within their organizations. Although conversationally fluent in the Thai language, I employed a translator during two interviews to ensure accuracy and build trust with participants. One interview was conducted via Skype after the conclusion of the research trip. Fourteen employees participated in the interviews. Some had little or no contact with the trafficking survivors their organization served, while others worked or even lived with these women on a day-to-day basis. Participants included NGO employees of American, Australian, and Thai nationalities and of Kachin, Karen, and Akha ethnicities over the age of 18.

The participants were informed that, for the purposes of this study, no names of individuals or organizations would be used. Participants would instead be identified according to gender, ethnicity, and role in the organization. Some of the interviews were arranged prior to the research trip via email contact with staff members at the NGO based on relationships I had made during prior fieldwork I conducted in 2009.
and 2010. Other participants were found via the snowball sampling method (see Higginbottom, 2004; Noy, 2008). A recruitment script was provided for each participant. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and was recorded while I took notes by hand. A list of preliminary interview questions is included in the Appendix. The method was based on principles of grounded theory. According to Charmaz (2005), grounded theory “entails developing increasingly abstract ideas about research participants’ meanings, actions, and worlds and seeking specific data to fill out, refine, and check the emerging conceptual categories” (p. 508). This method allowed me to re-formulate my questions as the study was progressing and draw on the meanings that emerged from the previous interviews to inform the direction of the study.

Limitations

Because some participants worked in positions requiring direct contact with female trafficking survivors while others worked in positions requiring little or no contact with the survivors that their organization served, the study cannot be generalized to all NGO employees working in the Trafficking In Persons space in Thailand. The limited sample size also does not allow the research to claim to be representative of all NGO employees. Additionally, having spent only a brief time with each participant may have limited my ability to assess the cultural underpinnings of the narratives on a deeper level. This study was also limited in that it does not engage specific concerns about the organizational structure of NGOs in development and the way these organizations are funded and maintained. While I recognize that these issues play a role in perpetuating the situations of “stasis” I will later describe, in this study I choose to focus on the way individual employees negotiate their own cultural values. The data gathered here are useful in that it provides us with a window into some common patterns, concerns, and experiences among anti-trafficking NGO employees in Thailand.

Findings

NGOs often narrate human trafficking in the form of short, sound-bite-length stories about the kidnapping, luring, or deception of vulnerable young women into the sex trade. Such narratives paint a picture of an innocent young woman who is unwittingly “tricked” into forced prostitution. While the details of such transactions are rarely explained, what is made clear is that an anti-trafficking NGO came to the rescue and helped the woman “escape” from her captors (Doezema, 2000; Parreñas, 2011; Segrave et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, as many scholars have illustrated, these narratives are not congruent with the realities of female migrant laborers and sex workers (often identified as “trafficking victims”) on the ground (see Doezema, 2010; Parreñas, 2011; Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005). By upholding these stereotypes,
however, NGOs are able to present themselves as benevolent actors, “attracting more funding, performing more effectively, and receiving greater legitimacy than government-sponsored international efforts (Castells, 2004, p. 330). Documents such as the State Department’s Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report implicitly encourage NGOs’ participation in explaining what trafficking is, how it occurs, and how women are victimized within it (see, for example, U.S. Department of State TIP Report, 2010). This, in turn, has policy implications, since the State Department relies on scant evidence provided by NGOs as source material for the data presented in the TIP Report (Parreñas, 2011; Segrave et al., 2009; personal communication, June 4, 2010).

In Thailand, Western anti-trafficking NGOs utilize narratives that promote their “unique” ability to see the problem of trafficking for what it is. These narratives are enacted by NGO employees whose jobs rely on their ability to communicate the values (and organizational culture) of the NGO. As such, these narratives are “constructions”—products of culture used to reinforce the values of NGO employees.

The Dominant Narratives

Through analyzing NGO employees’ thoughts and feelings about the trafficking of women in Thailand, I began to see five dominant narratives emerge. These narratives told a story about human trafficking and the role of NGOs in combating the problem. They included: “Thailand as backwards” (Civilizing narrative); “Thai values are non-modern” (Moralizing narrative); “They should be grateful” (Savior narrative); “Thailand is illegible to the West” (Othering narrative); and “Sex workers lack agency” (Victim narrative). These narratives helped NGO employees frame, categorize, and manage the complexity they faced in their daily work activities.

“Thailand is Backwards” (Civilizing Narrative)

Several Western NGO employees expressed the idea that Thailand exists in an “interim” stage of development, both economically and socially, and that trafficking was a product of the country’s low “rung” on the modernization continuum (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). As such, some employees described a vision for Thailand’s future, in which economic prosperity would lead to rights-based value systems and the ethic of labor equality. One such interviewee was Western Male Employee (WME 1), who worked to unionize migrant laborers in Thailand. WME 1’s organization received support from the U.S. Department of State and other official donors promoting democracy to strengthen international core labor standards, end enforced labor and discrimination in the workplace, support freedom of association and collective bargaining, and promote labor unions and democracy there (personal communication, August 5, 2011).

WME 1 expressed frustration regarding his attempts to instill these values into Thai society. He used the case of a garment factory in central Bangkok to illustrate
the challenge of getting Thai business-owners and government to see slavery as a problem:

   The owners were a Thai couple. It was a clear case of forced labor. The wife got up in front of the news cameras and said, “Well, we had to lock them in. We pay the agents a lot of money to bring them here. If we didn’t [lock them in], they’d run away.” (WME 1, August 5, 2011)

   The employee expressed bewilderment that conditions of slavery among migrant workers were so openly accepted among members of the Thai business class. Drawing implicitly on ideas of difference, he claimed that Thais are “not like us” and that it was “our” job to teach “them” how to be more civilized. Such deficiencies justified the employee’s retreat into a static notion of culture: by drawing on essentialized notions of cultural difference, WME 1 could claim to be an “authority figure” in the TIP space.

   When I questioned WME 1 further about whether the “acceptance” of slavery was based in a value system commonly held in Thai culture, the employee responded by offering another example:

   If you ride on the highway here, the chances of your getting killed are 10 times higher than in the U.S. There’s not an understanding that this should change. With trafficking, it’s the same attitude: it’s just the way it is… In cases of trafficked foreign nationals, you have issues of nationalism and immigration. Sixty percent of Thais… think foreigners shouldn’t have rights. The majority of Thais don’t care about Burmese workers at all… It will change slowly over time, and this change will relate to the economy as it develops. (WME 1, August 5, 2011)

   The employee’s story illustrates the premise of modernization theory: that in development contexts, a society’s economic progress will automatically beget values of individual human rights. This view is, in fact, a cultural lens in itself, a retreat into a familiar understanding about the Other as being different and “less than” the Western actor. The employee used this narrative as a way to make sense of a challenging cultural situation.

“Thailand is unethical” (Moralizing Narrative)

A second narrative that emerged was the Moralizing narrative. While the civilizing narrative focused on economic progress and difference according to ethnic and national identity lines, the Moralizing narrative enacted judgments about the idea that “they” (Thailand) are not like “us” (the West).

   WME 2 worked as the head of a program that trained Thai police in anti-trafficking protocol. Part of this training, the participant explained, was to instill in the Thai police a sense of value in pursuing justice. There was more to anti-trafficking work than simply following rules, he explained. It was up to him and his organization to also teach the police the social value of adhering to the rule of law.

   When asked about the extent to which cultural issues affected police behavior, WME 2 expressed feelings of frustration with Thai police who did not appear to care
about securing justice for trafficking victims, or who did not demonstrate a commitment to upholding individual human rights:

Well, [the issue is either] cultural or laziness. They have too much to do. It’s a pain-in-the-ass kind of thing to deal with. Culturally, cops are the same all around the world. They’re not incentivized. Do you get money? Do you get extra benefits? An award? No. You just get more paperwork. You get nothing . . . They don’t get our idea of individual human rights. They don’t get it at all. (WME 2, August 18, 2011)

Here, the participant offered a narrative describing the United States’ rights-based paradigm of law and order and his frustration that, in Thailand, “they” don’t “get” the importance of this system. He explained that despite the “universal laziness” of police across all cultures, the Western value of universal human rights is superior to the values held by police in Thailand.

WME 2’s inability to accept cultural relativism served a pragmatic, as well as idealistic, purpose. Like all NGO employees, the success of WME 2’s work depended on the willingness of the community with whom he was working to accept the premise of his organization’s activities. WME 2’s work involved persuading the Thai police to internalize and practice the values that were being promoted by the NGO. To fail to do so would imply a personal failure on the part of the employee.

In a broader context, such a practice represents an act of ritualistic hegemony—a way of reclaiming the dominance to which the West has grown accustomed, first under colonialism and, more recently, by promoting policies of neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2005). By insisting that a Western rule of law paradigm represents a morally advanced, Enlightened state of being (Keal, 1995), this employee, perhaps unknowingly, reinforced a familiar neo-colonial trope.

“*They should be grateful*” (Savior Narrative)

A third narrative that emerged depicted the Western NGO worker as “Savior” of the Thai “victim.” This narrative was demonstrated by a Missionary in a small Christian NGO in Chiang Mai dedicated to rescue and rehabilitation of female trafficking survivors. The employee described the NGO’s mission as “giving love to the girls” (personal communication, August 4, 2011). When I questioned how she dealt with situations in which her beneficiaries returned to the sex industry, as is often the case in situations of trafficking and prostitution, WFE 1 shared an emotional response:

A girl was put into forced labor at 8. We cared for her for 5 years. At age 13, she graduated from 6th grade. She had a one-on-one counselor. Literally, hours were spent talking to her about dignity and self worth. She chose not to prosecute the restaurant [that had enslaved her]. We gave her everything. We allowed her to go back for a week to her village and see her father – and she chose to go back. Now she’s HIV positive, living with a Thai guy, and has started having symptoms [of HIV] . . . I feel so disappointed that she didn’t even come back and say goodbye. We tried to love her as best as we could and give her opportunities – but she is so stuck in that feeling of self-worthlessness. (WFE 1, August 4, 2011)
WFE 1 went on to describe her feelings about the villages of the beneficiaries her organizations served. “There’s a village in the Northeast that has a party for a girl when she sells her virginity to a guy in Bangkok. The girl who receives the highest amount of money gets rewarded [by elders].”

“Isn’t that great!” she said sarcastically, imitating members of the girl’s community. “You got 50,000 baht! You got 80,000 baht! Now you can buy your grandmother a house!” Then, she looked at me with a pointed stare, as if to ask, How can you change that?

Of particular significance here was the fact that the employee’s sense of “duty” as a savior was undermined by her ungrateful beneficiary. In addition, while WFE 1 was concerned with the village’s pre-occupation with money and material possessions, it was not poverty that seemed to concern her. Rather, it was the value system she imagined the families in the village to be upholding, values not aligned with her own. The employee did not seem to consider that the Northeast, also known as Issan, is the most impoverished region in Thailand, with many people living under the official poverty line, earning no more than 1242 Thai Baht (or $41.47) per capita per month (Coronini-Cronberg, Laohasiriwong, & Gericke 2007). In such a circumstance of poverty, prostitution is perhaps one of the only viable economic options available. By failing to respectfully recognize the aspirations of the young woman with whom she was working, and by extension, the woman’s community, WFE1 retreated into a Western normative framework that placed dependency at the forefront of advocacy.

“Thailand is illegible to the West” (Othering Narrative)

A fourth narrative that emerged evoked a self-versus-other binary between Thailand and the West. This narrative seemed to also evoke the premise that Thai culture is fundamentally illegible, or incomprehensible, to the West. Two participants who enacted this narrative were Thai women in their thirties who I will refer to hereafter as TFE 1 and TFE 2.

In many trafficking situations in Thailand, the family of the female migrant (i.e., “trafficking victim”) is directly involved in the trafficking scenario (Rende Taylor, 2005). This is because girls and women are held responsible, both in Thai culture as well as several ethnic minority cultures, for upholding the family’s economic well-being (Skrobanek, Boonpakdi, & Janthakeero, 1997; Skrobanek, 2003). Given the conditions of economic deprivation and lack of jobs, however, resources are scarce and opportunities for economic success are few and far between, leaving many young women vulnerable to the financial draw of prostitution (Sassen, 2000; Skrobanek et al., 1997).

In my prior research, I observed that Western NGO employees were often critical of families’ “complicity” in their daughters’ migration experiences (Kamlter, 2010). Thai female employees, however, when asked about their impressions of survivors’ families, offered a different perspective:

In Lao, the family is involved. The girl or boy feels responsible for taking care of the family. Mostly people [traffickers] approach the family. Recruiter gives
a fancy offer. The families don’t know the truth [about what will happen to their child]. (TFE 1, July 29, 2011)

Adding her thoughts, a second employee, TFE 2, stated that, “As a mother, I don’t think I would be happy sending my family [into the sex industry].”

When asked for clarification, both women agreed that the families were aware of what their children would be doing, but not how extreme some of their situations might be. “They don’t know it will be torture,” TFE 2 said of the families. TFE 1 explained, “They have no idea how difficult or how bad.”

TFE 2 then went on to explain that, in addition to “not knowing how bad” the situation might be, Asian cultural norms allow for the families of trafficking survivors to simply “forget” the bad things that happened to their children:

In Asian culture, people think, “If it was difficult for me, I should just try to forget it. Karma will take care of the person who did the bad thing to me.” (TFE 2, July 29, 2011).

In addition to their desire to just “forget it,” girls may also be reluctant to speak about their experiences because, as TFE 2 explained, “Losing face is also an issue. You lose face by talking about it” (TFE 2, July 29, 2011).

I commented that it seemed ironic that, on the one hand, the employees were responding to a cultural practice of “not talking about it” while, on the other hand, the INGO they worked for required them to talk about trafficking and confront the situation directly. This interaction illustrates how culture shaped the way these employees processed their experiences. While familiar with Thai cultural norms relating to karma and losing face, these employees were nevertheless required to uphold a viewpoint underscoring the Western modernization narrative, as they were working on behalf of a Western NGO. Thai culture was therefore implicated in the NGO’s narrative. While seeming to try to maintain allegiance to their ethnic and national identities as Thai citizens, both employees exhibited caution around framing their fellow Thai citizens judgmentally.

In their discussion of karma and the acceptance of child prostitution in Thailand, the employees reinforced a self-versus-other binary between the West and the East. This binary framework evokes Said’s discussion of the way Western actors construct the identities and knowledge about the East. As Said explained,

In quite a consistent way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. (1979, p. 7)

In explaining that the acceptance of child prostitution in Thailand occurs because of essential differences between Thailand and the West, the employees reinforced a notion of difference.

Another, yet starkly different example of the Othering narrative can be seen in further discussion with TFE 2 whose work in the organization caused her to question
her role as a woman in Thai society:

I’m the first daughter. My parents have the expectation that I will take care of them and my siblings. I have to make my life better while earning enough to support them also. But it means they will never grow up. My siblings are in their 30s and they still want support from me . . . Working at the NGO helps me be more strong in my life.

Here, the employee contrasted her previous acceptance of her obedient gender role to her newly transformed view. She attributed this transformation to her experience working at the Western NGO. In so doing, the employee reinforced a narrative of difference that equated Thailand with fatalism around gender roles and the West with notions of gender equality. In narrating the difference between her previous view and her transformed view, this employee relied on culture as an explanation for her personal transformation. While championing the values of the Western NGO, the employee reinforced the idea that both difference and hierarchy exist between Thai and Western societies, with Western gender norms representing a more “advanced” form of social organization.

“Sex workers lack agency” (Victim Narrative)

Another prominent narrative involved Western interviewees’ difficulties reconciling the difference between forced prostitution and consensual sex work. The 2000 UN Palermo protocol (UNODC.org) describes human trafficking in what the International Labor Organization has admitted are vague parameters of the term “coercion” (Lisborg & Plambech, 2009). Such parameters often become conflated with circumstances of prostitution in international policy, so much so that many organizations and advocates avoid drawing a clear distinction between the two types of sex work: forced and consensual. To complicate this delineation, prostitution has become a contested issue in debates between feminists. The abolitionist feminist approach to prostitution, prescribed in U.S. policy, views all sex-work as oppressive to women and therefore seeks its abolishment, while the regulationist perspective holds that sex work is a “choice,” and seeks for legal reforms of policies negatively impacting sex workers (See Doezema & Kempadoo, 1998; Doezema, 2000; MacKinnon, 2006).

It was in the context of this discourse that I asked Western Male NGO Employee 1 (WME 1), the labor union organizer, whether sex workers in Thailand were able to benefit from the policies that his NGO was championing on behalf of other migrants (such as factory workers, farm hands, and domestic laborers):

You mean like . . . a sex workers union? No. The U.S. Government would never condone something like that. We can’t receive U.S. grant money if you support the premise that sex work is legitimate work (WME 1, August 5, 2011).

He then commented that he couldn’t imagine something like that existing in Thailand.
My interview with an employee at a sex workers’ union in Chiang Mai (WFE 4), however, revealed that such an organization does exist, and has for 30 years. Describing the organization as a “Thai sex worker organization working across a broad range of issues to promote the rights of sex workers, including migrant sex workers” (WFE 4, August 30, 2011), WFE 4 argued that prostitution was a cultural “given” in Thai and ethnic minority societies. Anti-trafficking NGOs needed to accept this, she felt, because “When you talk to Shan women in Burma, it’s not a question of if they’ll go to Thailand [to do sex work], it’s a question of when” (WFE 4, August 30, 2011).

Rather than pointing to prostitution as a social ill, WFE 4 framed sex work as a ritualistic part of the Shan (ethnic minority) experience. Moreover, by reinforcing the fact that her organization was composed of active sex workers (“‘Not ‘former,’” she reiterated), WFE 4’s narrative positioned sex work as an act of empowerment. As several scholars and activists arguing for pro-rights approaches to sex work have explained, such a narrative evokes a fundamental rejection of the “trafficking frame” itself (see Doezema 2000; Parreñas, 2011; Pollack, 2007; Segrave et al., 2009).

WFE 4 used culture and economic incentive as a way to explain the prevalence of prostitution in Thailand, and argued that these motivations for Shan women’s participation in sex work should be respected among anti-trafficking advocates. This example shows how an NGO employee used culture not as a polarizing “problem” in anti-trafficking work, but as a key to understanding the needs of the NGOs beneficiaries. WME 4 used the space of culture to support a narrative of inclusion, rather than hierarchy (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Discussion

Culture as a Space of Safety

The present research sought to assess how anti-trafficking NGO employees in Thailand construct narratives, or “stories,” about human trafficking. A key finding of this study was that NGO employees rely on culture to help them navigate their daily work experiences. I will now offer a theory, which I call “culture as a space of safety,” to explain why the employees I interviewed ritualistically retreat from the overwhelming circumstances that confront them in their daily work activities. This theory engages the premise that culture, in itself, is a form of communication.

I take as my premise the “disconnect” which I observed between Western NGO employees’ intercultural work experiences and their apparent inability to suspend judgment about members of the culture in which their organization operated. Despite the fact that Western NGOs have been operating in development contexts since the latter part of the twentieth century (Lindenberg & Bryant, 2001), NGO employees have been slow to adapt their communication and training practices to the realities on the ground (Suzuki, 1998). This is due, I argue, to a need on the part of NGO employees—those “on the ground”—to take refuge in their own cultural
values and practices as a way of coping with challenging day-to-day experiences. I suggest that the need to retreat from such challenging experiences is strong enough to sway the employees so that they do not alter their practices even when it may be in their professional interest to do so. Despite the fact that culture is not a static entity but, as Wedeen (2002) suggested, a “social process through which people reproduce together the conditions of intelligibility that enable them to make sense of their worlds” (p. 717), the NGO employees I interviewed appeared to retreat into static notions of culture, narrating their experiences according to fixed ideas about identity and difference.

Carey (1992) described communication as a ritualistic act—a way of reinforcing one’s purpose and identity in a given community (p. 18). Drawing from Carey’s theory, we may see how, in responding to challenging situations, NGO employees retreat to the ritual of communicative reinforcement. By reenacting culture as a space of safety, they recreate a space of comfort in which the values that motivate their participation in the organization, and the meanings associated with their professional roles are not threatened. Carey’s theory of ritual communication informs my theory of the “safety net” of culture. I found that the NGO employees I interviewed, ritualistically retreated into a known space—a space in which their professional goals, ethical compasses, and personal values remained static, and therefore safe.

When considering the work of NGO employees in the Trafficking In Persons space, it is not difficult to understand why it might be desirable to retreat into the safe space of culture. The employees I interviewed confronted sobering, dangerous, and rapidly changing conditions on a daily basis, often characterized by these employees as “emergency situations.” Some of the situations described by participants about the victims of human trafficking with whom they worked included: illegal border crossings, rape, sexual abuse, memory loss, negotiations with criminal networks, imprisonment, torture, death threats, corruption within law enforcement, starvation, poverty, and lack of confidence in the rule of law (personal communication with participants, August 5, 8, 9, 18, 30, 2011). In the face of constantly shifting contexts that place demands on NGO employees and force them to confront their deeply held values and beliefs, culture becomes a way of navigating complexity and uncertainty. It provides a space of psychological safety—the frame through which employees view the world, and the mechanism they use to mediate their daily work experiences.

Examining the narratives in this theoretical context may inform our understanding of NGO employees’ need for order within their communication practices. As Carey has discussed, ritualistic communication practices such as “strings of speech” represent the human need for symbolic social order (1989, p. 19). The employee interviews highlighted in this study demonstrated a tendency to “return” to the binary categorizations of “them” and “us” that often serve as a safety mechanism for survivors of trauma (Martin-Baro, 1994). As such, these narratives provide opportunities for understanding the role that culture plays in creating “spaces of safety” in their advocacy efforts.
Conclusion

The narrative frameworks of international organizations have the ability to influence an audience’s understanding of development problems. The dominant narratives about the trafficking of women in Thailand are deployed by NGO employees, who are tasked with the role of “speaking for” trafficking victims, sex workers and, indeed, for the Trafficking In Persons space more broadly. NGO employees use these narratives to formulate a clear image of their organization and their roles as advocates, even if such an image reinforces self-versus-other binaries that eclipse their understanding of the women they seek to help.

But as Alcoff (1991–1992) has warned, “speaking for” others can create a hierarchical power relationship between Western actors and non-Western actors, thereby reinforcing essentialized notions of third-world women (Mohanty, 1991) and perpetuating the hegemony of the privileged West. Such speech acts also have policy implications. As I discuss elsewhere (dissertation, forthcoming), anti-prostitution legislation mandated by the Bush Administration in U.S. foreign aid projects is still evoked in the narratives of U.S.-based NGO employees, despite the fact that this legislation has been overturned under the Obama Administration (personal communication with anti-trafficking NGO employee in Los Angeles, March 4, 2011). There is, therefore, an important connection to be made between narrative frameworks of trafficking in Thailand and the enactment of anti-trafficking policy. The way research questions relating to trafficking are framed, the way the stories of survivors are told, and the way organizational narrative frameworks are created all directly affect the lives of women on the ground. Frameworks that reinforce “information hierarchies” have the potential of doing real harm to women when their agency is seen as limited and their real needs are overlooked.

The narratives explored here suggest the need for the public discourse on trafficking to embrace a more complex communication space. Awareness of the cultural frameworks through which NGO employees operate could allow the discourse to move beyond the constraints of binary thinking and allow for contradictions, ambiguities, and cultural intersections to resonate. While culture can never be avoided, it can be acknowledged and understood. Such an understanding may open up space for a more relativistic, holistic approach to anti-trafficking advocacy.

Notes

[1] Trafficking In Persons “space” is a term commonly used among actors within the U.S. State Department-driven anti-trafficking movement to refer to the work being done by the various organizations, agencies, and institutions – both nationally and internationally – to combat human trafficking.

References


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How and when did you first become involved in issues of trafficking?
2. How do survivors of trafficking find your organization, or how do you find them?
3. How do you communicate with survivors?
4. Do you feel that survivors who come to your organization are forthcoming in discussing their experiences of being trafficked?
5. What phase of anti-trafficking work do you provide to survivors (i.e. prevention, rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation)? What populations does your organization serve?
6. From whom do you receive your funding? Do the needs of your stakeholders affect the way you communicate with survivors?
7. What is your vision of success for a survivor of human trafficking?
8. Are there issues on the ground that are difficult to reconcile with the needs of your funders?
9. What types of cultural barriers do you face in your efforts to help survivors? How do you manage language and cultural barriers between your staff members and trafficking survivors?
10. It is such a complex issue. Are there things you think people in the west might not understand or want to believe about the issues or the girls/women? How do you handle this?
11. What are your biggest challenges in your work?
12. What is your vision of success?
13. What has been the thing that has surprised you the most about this work?
14. What has been your biggest frustration in working with female survivors in their rehab process?
15. What kinds of challenges do female survivors face?
16. How often do you see and work with survivors?
   - Individual basis?
   - Groups?
   - Working with families?
17. What are your opinions of the families of trafficking survivor?
18. How do you feel about the work that you do?
19. How does your family perceive your work?
20. Do you feel that these problems have a solution?
21. What kind of impact do you feel you’re having? How do you know?
22. What is your favorite success story?
23. What was one of your more difficult days/cases and how did you deal with it?
24. Some young women go back to the trade even after all the work you do. How do you handle it?
25. Why do you think this happens? Is it the norm, or it rare?
26. How has the work you’ve done here affected your opinions about women’s rights in your home country, or community? Has it changed the way you view gender issues? Relationships between men and women? The role of a girl in her family