

Doing resistance their own way: counter-narratives of street vending in Hanoi, Vietnam through solicited journaling

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This paper explores the strengths and complexities of using solicited journals/diaries with a marginalised, itinerant population in Vietnam's capital city Hanoi. We draw on journals completed by Hanoi street vendors to better understand the everyday lived experiences of a population targeted by state officials for fines and retribution. Since 2008, street vending has been banned on a number of streets and public spaces in Hanoi. Yet concurrently, livelihood options for those without formal education or skills are increasingly limited. Based on solicited journals kept by street vendors during 2012, we find that journals provide a channel for everyday politics and subtle resistance measures to be reflected on by research participants, and for detailed understandings of state–society relations to emerge. Moreover, from an analysis of participants' journal entries as well as de-briefing interviews, we consider the strengths and complexities of this qualitative method, situated within a context of state-induced fear among an itinerant and sometimes non-literate population. While the strengths of the approach became quickly apparent in the detailed and insightful narratives we received, literacy limitations, vendor feelings of inadequacy regarding journal entry style and complications regarding a sense of obligation to us as researchers raise a number of concerns. Researchers must therefore reflect carefully on the practicalities, ethics and power relations involved with this method. Nonetheless, we also note how participants became inspired to rework the journaling process to meet their own needs and were empowered to circumnavigate state controls to voice counter-narratives of their rights to the street.

Key words: Vietnam, solicited journals, qualitative methods, street vending, everyday politics, livelihoods

Introduction

Solicited journals have become increasingly popular as a social science tool to gain in-depth reflections and longitudinal understandings of respondent opinions and circumstances.¹ By allowing people time and space to reflect on a certain topic, rather than the immediate question and answer format of interviews or focus groups, journals – also called solicited diaries – potentially allow for deeper, more nuanced understandings of everyday subjectivities, emotions and activities over time (Jacelon and Imperio 2005; Morrison 2012). This method is increasingly utilised in the health sciences to gain information on health behaviours and healing processes, and to improve reflexivity and training for medical personnel (Milligan *et al.* 2005; Edwards *et al.* 2011). In education, journals are

used to examine both teacher development and student learning processes (Ostapuk 1997; Humble and Sharp 2012). Yet this technique has been largely overlooked as a human geography qualitative research strategy, with the exceptions of Meth (2003, 2004), Latham (2010) and Morrison (2012).

With these potential benefits in mind, and noting the limited use of this method within geography, the aim of this paper is to review the outcomes of a solicited journal project in the Global South, focusing on mobile street vendors in a context where they are targeted daily for fines and retribution by state officials. While wishing to probe the everyday lived experiences of our population group, much like Meth (2003) and Morrison (2012), we extended this method to an itinerant population, asking participants to document how they use forms of everyday

politics and resistance to reconfigure informality and legality to create viable livelihoods. Our hope was that by giving street vendors time and space to reflect on their activities in private, and by building a relationship of trust over repeat interactions, they would be willing to share their strategies with us. While we succeeded in gaining detailed insights into the everyday politics of street vendor survival, including how vendors remap urban public space to their advantage, there are a number of cautions to using this method with a mobile and occasionally illiterate population – a population often creating livelihoods in a climate of fear.

In the Global South, modernist and revanchist policies often position street vendors in contradiction with state visions for urban development, leaving them with limited rights or possibilities for livelihood security (Brown 2006). Street vendors in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city, are not welcomed by the municipal government. As part of its plans to modernise and 'develop' the city, the government has banned street vending since 2008 on 62 selected streets and 48 public spaces (People's Committee of Hanoi 2008). Yet, over 11 000 vendors and marketplace traders ply their trade through the city's streets (Making Markets Work Better for the Poor 2007). The majority of street vendors, especially itinerant traders, are rural to urban migrants, often women who lack access to more durable livelihood options because of limited formal education, financial and social capital. They utilise what we suggest are everyday politics – subtle, under-the-radar approaches – to either comply with the law in a manner that suits them, or work around regulations and their enforcement. By utilising journaling, our aim was to gain a more nuanced awareness of these 'everyday politics', or how street vendors are

embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct. (Kerkvliet 2009, 232)

Previous research on Hanoi's street vendors, completed via interviews and participant observation (cf. DiGregorio 1994; Higgs 2003; Mitchell 2008; Turner and Schoenberger 2012) or surveys and interviews (Jensen and Peppard 2003), has produced important understandings of trader livelihoods. These method choices are not surprising because they allow insights into vendor actions and routines, reflecting methods used elsewhere in the Global South regarding informal trade (cf. Little 2004; Bhowmik 2006; Tranberg Hansen *et al.* 2013). In the Hanoi case, we wanted to explore whether journaling could provide additional insights compared with former methods, while focusing on street vendors' everyday politics and resistance to the 2008 street trading legislation.

Solicited journals provide the researcher with a unique point of access to the 'rhythms and routines of people's day-to-day lives' and, in so doing, have been argued to 'produce more detailed, more reliable, and more focused accounts than can other comparable qualitative methods' (Latham 2010, 199, 191).

To situate our experience using solicited journals, we briefly review how journals have been used effectively elsewhere, while also focusing on their possible limitations. We then outline our case study, drawing on five months of fieldwork in Hanoi. In 2012, ten street vendors agreed to keep journals for us for one week, a length of time chosen because it offered the chance to gather in-depth material, while minimising our imposition on participants' activities. These vendors were interviewed at the start of the process, visited during the week and re-interviewed at the conclusion regarding their journal's content and the journaling process itself. A brief review of our findings reveals the degree and depth of detail we accessed with regards to vendor livelihood negotiations and resistance strategies. We conclude by discussing the strengths and complexities raised by this approach.

Solicited journals

Hailed as an innovative platform for research participants to share their lived experiences, solicited journals have gained popularity as a participatory research method. While broadening the qualitative tools available to researchers, journals can increase the level of control participants have over the research process, challenging traditional power relationships (Hayman *et al.* 2013; Thomas 2007). Nevertheless, because of the context-contingent nature of individual journals, the rigour and usefulness of this method is suggested to hinge on its application in conjunction with other methods – such as interviews or focus groups (Corti 1993; Kenten 2010; Zimmerman and Wieder 1977).

Morrison notes that solicited journals provide 'snapshots of particular social spaces, embodied and emotional practices in the making' (2012, 74). This can be particularly beneficial when working with populations living on society's fringes – such as street vendors – whose daily experiences may be difficult to access through other research methods (cf. Hayman *et al.* 2013). Moreover, journals offer a space for participants to represent themselves, sharing what they deem important (Meth and McClymont 2009). This is particularly critical for subaltern populations whose accounts may differ from official or dominant narratives and who may have limited opportunities and few public outlets to voice their perspectives and have their stories heard (Turner 2013).

Another benefit of journaling is to enable the researcher access to sensitive, highly personal or traumatic

information, such as intimate relationships or sexual assault, in a way that other methods may not (Thomas 2007). As a mechanism that ensures participants are in control of how much they share and when, journaling provides a space in which individuals may be more comfortable sharing private or painful stories, or discussing personal and emotional topics (McGregor 2006; Meth 2003 2004; Meth and McClymont 2009). For our research, journaling provided vendors with a space to share their stories of developing an everyday politics regarding local government directives, revealing insights into how different forms of power intersect.

The sense of privacy journaling offers can also facilitate participant reflexivity or self-examination (Blake 2005). Solicited journals are 'both a record and reflection' of the lived experiences of participants (Milligan *et al.* 2005, 1891). This reflection may have reciprocal value for both researcher and participant; in addition to generating in-depth accounts of daily experiences, participants may benefit from an opportunity to contemplate their situations (Boud 2001; Fulwiler 1987). As Dwyer *et al.* (2013) suggest, journaling itself can be therapeutic and liberating. Similarly, Sealy (2012) notes that writing about one's intimate experiences can offer a means of coping with traumatic experiences or facilitate personal improvement.

Despite these benefits, reviews of solicited journaling have yielded several concerns. Meth (2004) argues that for those with minimal levels of literacy, the act of writing can be an obstacle for expression, rather than a conduit. While this can be mitigated by having a third individual transcribe participants' stories, this is not always an option and can compromise privacy (Davies and Coxon 1990). Audio or visual diaries can act as substitutes for written diaries, yet carry their own limitations, as participants may be unfamiliar with the technology required (Kenten 2010). Limits on physical capacities – such as poor eyesight or fatigue after a long work day – can likewise leave participants disadvantaged (Meth 2004). Thus, while journals prove effective when used with populations who have the necessary skills to participate, they may obscure rather than enhance knowledge regarding the daily experiences of less-capable participants (Hampton and Morrow 2003).

Unlike a regular interview, journals require prolonged involvement, potentially making the process a burden for participants. Researchers must likewise evaluate the possibility of participants abandoning the task because of a lack of interest, a change in responsibilities or other unexpected events. Furthermore, there may be a noticeable variance in the quality of journals and participant efforts (O'Connell and Dyment 2011). This can make it difficult to find a balance between providing minimal guiding instructions for an open process and more specific step-by-step guidelines to encourage consistency (Harris 2008).

Dilemmas of information self-selection also exist. The question then becomes how to account for participant positionality. One solution is to undertake a mixed methods approach. By combining solicited journals with other methods – such as questionnaires, interviews or focus groups – the researcher may gain additional contextualising information, increase rigour and minimise the impact of selection bias (Kenten 2010; Meth 2004). Follow-up interviews, for instance, can provide an opportunity for the researcher to enquire about the participants' selection process regarding what was included or not in journal entries (Corti 1993; Zimmerman and Wieder 1977). This was one approach we followed in our work with street vendors, detailed next.

Methods: journaling with Hanoi's street vendors

We completed conversational interviews with 187 vendors, semi-structured interviews with 15 police and policy makers, and participant observation (including vendor and police counts at five sites around the city at specific times) in conjunction with our solicited journal approach. For the latter, ten participants were recruited through conversational interviews. Our journal participants varied in terms of their trading practices, two being stationary and eight trading itinerantly. Nine vendors were rural–urban migrants, while one stationary vendor was a long-time Hanoi resident. They ranged in age from 18 to 80 years old, and had been trading between three weeks and 60 years. Six were women, while two of the four men recruited their wives to help write their journals, discussed below.

As part of a four-step process, the first author and our Vietnamese research assistant initially undertook a conversational interview – in some cases multiple interviews – with potential journal participants. These interviews enabled us to gather contextual information about vending livelihoods and were critical for building trust and rapport considering the sensitivity of our topic and the highly personal nature of sharing a journal. We then invited 14 individuals to keep solicited journals, 10 of whom agreed. In view of the time required to participate, vendors were offered a modest monetary gift on completion of their journal.

Participants were given detailed verbal and written instructions and asked to document their daily experiences as informal traders during one week, including reflections on work routines and interactions with suppliers, customers and police. Each participant received a small journal – with instructions in Vietnamese pasted inside – and a pen. We distributed journals with 40 pages, hoping that participants would not feel obliged to write extensive amounts, but would likewise not feel

constrained by lack of space (cf. Morrison 2012). They were also given the contact information for our Vietnamese research assistant whom they could call throughout the process to ask questions, voice concerns or withdraw their participation.

Several days into the journaling process we undertook 'check-in interviews'. These interviews proved invaluable. We were able to clarify a few miscommunications regarding instructions, while also ensuring that the journaling process was on track. One vendor had initially forgotten to write in her journal, but quickly started after we checked in. After one week the journals were collected, translated and reviewed. Finally, we scheduled de-briefing interviews to clarify questions we had regarding journal entries and to ask vendors to reflect on their involvement. Most participants carefully contemplated the usefulness of this method, noting how they had reworked the process if needed (discussed below). Together, these four steps offered critical benefits. We were able to contextualise journal information pre- and post-interviews; maintain communication throughout to ensure participants' comfort and keep the process on track; and give vendors space for critical reflexivity on the process as a whole.

Livelihood and resistance strategies revealed

And here I am, writing with my sincere feelings so people who don't vend, and those from other countries can understand about people like myself. (Ly²)

As the method promises, vendors' journals revealed detailed narratives in a way that conversational interviews did not. Taking the time they needed, vendors used their journals to craft stories of their daily experiences. Regardless of the length of the entries – some participants wrote a few sentences per day, while others nearly filled their 40 pages – and whether by their own hand or via a 'transcriber', the journals offer a nuanced glimpse into vendor livelihood coping strategies.

The journals reveal a broad range of concerns and tactics regarding maintaining a street vending livelihood (forming the core of another article). Briefly, some vendors used their journals to provide insights into their reasons for starting to vend, including being pushed off peri-urban land holdings by expansionist city policies. All vendors reflected on their daily routines, long work hours, the demands of vending and the impressions vendors have of their own occupation in the city. Many vend as only one part of their livelihood portfolio, also undertaking other income-generating tasks such as house cleaning, or part-time work on peri-urban farms. Vendors used their journals to express the pride they take in their work and to emphasise their dedication to being 'honest' traders. The degree of competition they face, the stress of a day with

poor sales, and the sheer exhaustion that comes with this occupation were repeated themes. In turn, access to support networks and a shared sense of community were highlighted as important coping mechanisms.

More specifically, journaling provided a platform for vendors to illustrate their everyday politics and how they are doing resistance their own way. We gained nuanced understandings of how police enforce the street vending ban and vendor resistance strategies and negotiations when 'reprimanded' by police (being fined or having goods confiscated or discarded). All vendors detailed interactions with police, focusing on the loss of income and products caused by police raids. Extensive descriptions of the emotional stress and financial losses from these interactions were important reminders of the precariousness of these livelihoods. For instance, Thinh noted:

Today I was very sad. I walked so many streets but couldn't sell anything. If the police ban vending, what can people from rural areas like us do? I kept walking my bike to try selling. I finally could make a sale, thank god, now I had enough money to pay a fine I had received.

Vendors noted explicit resistance tools undertaken to avoid such fines, including running from police, paying bribes or similar payments, or trying to negotiate and assert their 'right' to the street (if a long-term resident).

Vendors explained that they must continue to work this way to subsist despite the ban, contending that police are in the wrong when clearing vendors from the streets. Street vendor Nam argued that by trying to prevent vendors from trading, police fail to fulfil their social responsibilities: 'There is a list of rules Ho Chi Minh said police should live by. One of them is that they should be loving and taking care of the people. I don't see the police doing those things'. Vendors suggested that the ban was unrealistic, leaving them no other livelihood options: 'We might as well die . . . they said they would clear street vendors, [but then] what could we do?' (Thinh). Others wrote of the unfairness of the ban, one vendor noting that the police spend less time catching thieves than they spend targeting vendors trying to make an honest living. In sum, the journal entries revealed poignant insights into the complex political-economic maneuverings that vendors must undertake to maintain an income.

Journaling strengths and complexities

Solicited journaling brings with it a number of strengths and complexities. The space and time journals gave vendors to reveal their own stories of legal/illegal work and public space negotiations, in a format they were comfortable with, allowed us to gain nuanced understandings of vendor everyday politics, resistance measures and interactions with those in positions of authority.

Moreover, details of vendors' emotional responses to police actions went far beyond that collected during interviews. These findings broadly reflect and add to the strengths others have found in utilising this method to better understand everyday subjective experiences.

Nonetheless, when used with marginalised groups and mobile populations, there are a number of complexities that must be recognised, even if, as in our case, participants often find innovative ways to work around these. As one participant, Dao, explained, because of her schedule she staggered journaling with other commitments rather than writing in one stretch each day:

Sometimes I was too tired to write. I didn't have a lot of time. Usually I get back to my place at 8 pm, then many women take turns to use the only bathroom. The landlord doesn't like us keeping the light on too long in the evening [because of electricity costs]. So by 10 pm, I need to turn off the light. I often used the time when I couldn't sell to write a bit here and there, because I can't really write in the evening. But I get anxious if I spend too much time in one place – I feel like I am missing potential sales in other places I haven't covered, so I take very little time to rest and write during the day.

Street vendors often have low levels of formal education and while we took measures to mitigate this hurdle by offering audio recorders, many took the initiative to overcome this limitation on their own terms. Five vendors had someone else transcribe their ideas into writing, either a trusted friend or child (cf. Meth 2004). The result was that street vendors not only contributed by sharing their stories, but by taking the initiative to adapt the method to their skills and abilities, participants played an active role in shaping the process itself. One vendor even chose to incorporate drawings to broaden his tools for expression, presenting us with a series of David and Goliath themed sketches reflecting his take on vendor/state relations.

At times vendors were concerned about the quality of their diary entries, but came up with techniques to overcome the pressure to 'compose' entries. Nam explained, 'I didn't have any problems coming up with things to say – there were lots of things I wanted to tell. But I was careful about the order of things I shared'. Nam ultimately decided to pick one specific 'story' or event to write about each day. Another participant, *Thịnh*, wrote a rough draft before transcribing it into her journal, despite us repeating that we were unconcerned about the flow of ideas or neatness. Others, however, needed more encouragement that they were doing well. Dao noted 'because I haven't written anything for a long time, holding a pen is difficult, and I was worried that my hand writing was bad and hard to read, which made me ashamed'. Dao added that she only finished grade two because her parents were poor. Another vendor, *Qui*, wrote one paragraph, and when met

for a check-in, asked if her entry was acceptable, seemingly needing reassurance that she had done a 'good job'.

We found that respondents also self-edited their work for unexpected reasons. When asked afterwards if there were certain things that she wanted to include, but decided not to, Dao noted that she left out many stories about being mistreated by Hanoi residents: 'I didn't write them because I wasn't sure if you would like to hear those stories or not'. Dao added that she was concerned about describing how harshly she was treated by city residents because our research assistant was from Hanoi. Interestingly though, she was willing to tell us these stories in person, with our assistant present. Dao explained that not being able to see our faces and gauge our reactions when we read her stories made her feel uneasy about the way certain stories would be received, an interesting observation we have not found in other critiques of this approach.

One disconcerting complexity we discovered during de-briefing interviews was that some vendors participated out of a sense of obligation. While some participants agreed to keep journals because they 'wanted to share stories' (*Lý*) or because they 'enjoy writing' (*Triệu*), others agreed out of 'respect' for the first author and her assistant. Having already spent time getting to know one another, vendors felt obliged to help us. It was only after they had completed their journals and we asked if they would do this again that these participants said no, noting that it had been too tiring and difficult, but that they initially agreed to participate because of the rapport we had cultivated. This left us feeling very uneasy about unforeseen negative impacts and the ethical concerns of building such relationships to begin with.

While both men and women were recruited, it was more challenging to find willing male participants. Of the four men who initially agreed to participate, only one actually kept a journal, while two more had their wives write the journal, both stating that their wives were 'better at writing'. The fourth male recruited multiple vendors to write their stories in the journal, saying he did not want to participate because 'it would be too easy'. On reflection and further interviews, we think this might have been a face-saving exercise because of a lack of literacy skills. Clearly this case also has repercussions for ethical concerns regarding consent, since we were unaware he was soliciting others to be involved.

Finally, our use of solicited journals was complicated by working with a largely itinerant population. Our ability to stay in contact with research participants was limited, as demonstrated by the fact that of our ten participants, only seven completed their week-long journals. Because not all our participants traded from fixed locations, had cell-phones or home addresses, keeping in touch called for multiple measures. This contrasts with the work of Meth (2003) and Morrison (2012), whose research was

with stationary populations, demonstrating that the application of journaling is somewhat context-contingent.

Concluding thoughts: doing resistance their own way

Asking street vendors, working on the edge of legality in a socialist country, to reveal their everyday negotiations with authority figures and resistance measures through the written word might sound like a project bound to fail. Indeed, throughout this research, we remained highly conscious of the possible repercussions of the written word, given this context. There are often severe, negative consequences associated with critiquing the state in Vietnam – a country embracing market economy reforms yet still politically socialist, centrally controlled and intolerant of criticism. Nonetheless, with our patient participants, we gained nuanced insights into the disconnects between state laws, market imperatives and the everyday routines and challenges of those involved in vending on Hanoi's streets.

It is certain that when completing research with marginalised communities often making a hand-to-mouth living, one must be extremely careful to acknowledge and account for concerns such as available time, skill levels, feelings of obligation and confidentiality. Yet, building on our experiences and with due consideration for the ethics and power dynamics involved, we advocate the use of solicited journals because of their benefits for gathering in-depth understandings of everyday coping strategies, livelihood dilemmas and resistance measures. For the vendors involved in this project, resistance was implicit to their participation. Not only did they detail resistance tactics, but the *very act* of writing their journals became a resistance mechanism in itself. Standing in stark contrast to the negative representations of vendors regularly made visible by the government and state media, vendors used their journals to voice their own stories and nuanced counter-narratives. As vendors' daily experiences are characterised by processes of negotiation, ingenuity and the remaking of illicit spaces, their journals offer insight into these everyday actions undertaken in order to mediate an enduring position within arenas of uneven power. All told, solicited journals can play an important role for research examining the dynamics among legality and illegality, everyday politics and resistance, and how power is embedded in public space negotiations in the Global South.

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Notes

- 1 A Scopus review documented 387 articles on solicited journals since 1985, with an important rise since 2000. In 2012, 53 articles were published, the highest annual number to date. Of these, just under half were categorised as social science, followed by medicine and nursing.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms.

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