

Chapter 8. Drawing from Feminist Epistemologies to Research Resistance: The Case of Single Moms in Hanoi.

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“[t]here’s something odd about the place of women in classic studies of cultural resistance. They have none. There’s mention here and there, but often as an addendum, an afterthought: oh yes, and remember the ladies! Some of this absence can be explained by the institutional sexism that kept women from academic scholarship until relatively recently, but this doesn’t account for all of it. The problem instead, I believe the problem stems from the paradigm of cultural resistance as it is commonly understood. *The cultural resistance we have been looking at so far is public – it takes place on the street or in the fields, on the barricades or in the bars. And this public sphere, historically, has been the province of men.* Therefore, if we look for examples of women’s cultural resistance here we are bound to be disappointed. However, *turn your attention to the realm women have traditionally inhabited: the home and hearth – that is the private – and a different story is revealed*” (Duncombe 2002, 240, emphasis added).

This quote echoed strongly within me as I reflected on how to approach fieldwork among Single Moms in Vietnam for my PhD dissertation (see Murru 2016). There, I met a group of women living multiple subordinations: as women in a patriarchal society; as mothers in a country that considers maternity as a public matter to be regulated since it concerns the upbringing of the next generation of citizens; and as outcasts, the status of Single Mom being denigrated and marginalized. Eager to understand how they resisted the various power relations associated to their condition as Single Moms, I struggled, however, to locate a specific *form* of resistance. As I initially tried to associate what I was observing with existing literature on resistance, none of the observations quite coincided with what I had previously read. In trying to unlock this process, I turned to the field of Gender Studies which had a long history of studying oppressed and subordinated groups. By changing perspective in this way, I quickly realized that both the field of Gender Studies and Resistance Studies had been concerned with similar preoccupations.

First, they were both committed to unveil marginal groups of subjects and rehabilitate them in scientific inquiry. Indeed, feminist scholars in the 1960s notably started highlighting that social and political sciences did not pay much attention to what happened in daily life, being more focused on men, power, and the public life. As a result, some groups of people, such as women, were not taken into consideration in scientific knowledge production. Feminist scholars thus started to target the absence of women in History, Social Sciences, and Biology, and initiated a process of rehabilitating women in science (Haraway 1981; Harding 1986, 1987, 1991; Leduc 2004). Similarly, Resistance Studies also developed through the realization of an over focus on the dominant, powerful or political power, leaving aside resistance that happens in the daily lives of subordinates. It is Scott in the 80s who opened up the study of resistance to include ordinary, daily, hidden, or disguised forms of resistance (1983, 1985, 1987, 1990; see introduction of this volume for an outline of Scott’s conceptualization of everyday resistance). In doing so, he unveiled and gave meaning to a whole category of social interactions that had been left out of scientific inquiry, including those of marginalized groups – such as peasants, slaves, and workers – as well as unusual practices – such as folktales, carnivals, or poems. Thus, both areas of study, through targeting uncharted scientific terrains, led to a work of rehabilitation through the introduction of new subjects in academia, and the development and increase of case studies. In addition, these scientific productions created the need to unite scholars dispersed in various disciplines – be it history, anthropology, social and political

sciences, economy, biology, etc. – under a same field of study in order to strengthen and render visible their common objectives; thus creating the fields of both Gender Studies and Resistance Studies.

Second, scholars in both fields noticed a tendency to over-categorize subjects – such as white women or black women, workers, slaves, peasants, etc. – leaving aside an intersectional understanding about their condition of subordination (Hill Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). There was also a tendency to overuse dichotomies, classifying subjects as either: men/women, dominant/resister, strong/weak, active/passive, public/private, etc. (Vinhagen & Lilja 2007; Strega 2015). However, subordination is a complex embodied experience which happens through the interaction of various relations of power (Spivak 2009). In other words, both fields aim at unveiling and rehabilitating categories of subjects that had been left out of scientific inquiry *and* targeting complex configurations of domination and power relations in order to understand how subjects can effectively challenge them.

In attempting to resolve these issues, feminist scholars went one step further and came to target the way scientific knowledge itself is produced. They discovered that, not only were women absent from research, but also the whole research design (namely the matrix of how science was created) actually led to the exclusion of women. This is due to the fact that research carried androcentric and ethnocentric biases that were repeated in the type of knowledge it produced. Thus they started a process to rethink and deconstruct, from its roots, the way scientific knowledge is produced, in order to equip scientific disciplines with tools to study marginalized and subordinate groups (Sprague 2005).

In this chapter, I argue that the emerging field of Resistance Studies might benefit from similar epistemological deconstructions. I unpack this recommendation through the description of the findings from my fieldwork with a group of Single Moms in Hanoi. I highlight how it is the framework guiding my research (inspired by feminist theory) that enabled an understanding of their resistance that would not have been made visible otherwise. Scholars associated with the field of Resistance Studies are increasingly pushing to the forefront the debate about suitable research methods, methodologies, and ethics and making sense of resistance (see for example the special issue of the *Journal of Resistance Studies* on “Researching Resistance: Methodological Challenges, Ethical Concerns and the Future of Resistance Studies”, Törnberg 2017, and Stierl 2018). Nevertheless, there is still reluctance to debate about possible epistemological frameworks guiding our research (for an exception, see the collective volume edited by Strega & Brown 2015, *Research as Resistance. Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, and the Special Issue of the *Journal of Resistance Studies* edited by Motta & Seppälä 2016, *Feminized Resistance*); in other words, to explore how the manner in which research is envisaged influences the type of knowledge that is possible to bring to light as well as the direction we want to give to this process.

Moreover, the debate around the epistemological frame for studying it is a crucial one, specifically because of the particularly complex exercise of conceptualizing resistance. Indeed, Foucault’s (1972, 1994) theorization of power and the debate inspired by his framework have largely influenced new ways of thinking about resistance. His work opened up a reflection and understanding of power which is not solely approached as coercive, but which transcends politics, is diffused throughout all spheres of society and which can also be understood as a positive force, thus as “productive” (Foucault 1982, 2001; Polese et al 2018). Starting from this perspective, scholars, and in particular critical scholars, have engaged with a variety of interpretations of processes of political engagement at all levels of society. These debates have nurtured a conceptualization of resistance that is no longer limited to visible/public/organized forms of protest such as social movements and revolutions, but is also apprehended in the daily life of subordinates and other less conventional practices: “If power is not only a sovereign

center forbidding (and punishing), but more importantly a productive multiple network of power techniques, without a unifying center, then resistance also changes face” (Vinthagen 2007, 3). In this perspective, although I contend it might need to evolve (for instance, because it does not make reference to the concept of violence – see ending remarks of this volume), I sympathize with Vinthagen and Lilja (2007)’s understanding of resistance as “a subaltern response to power; a practice that challenges and which might undermine power” (2007, 1). This definition allows to separate “resistance” from “agency”, excluding all practices that do not happen from a subaltern position, although they might undermine power. Being a “practice” implies a sense of action (understood broadly, including discourse). Being apprehended as a “response to power” implies a dynamic relation between the two concepts. Therefore, this definition has the advantage of encompassing a wide range of manifestations of resistance without discarding unconventional forms.

As a matter of fact, recent works on social movements illustrate the ways in which citizens mobilize contentious politics to question, challenge, or reject decisions that they consider to be harmful for them. Furthermore, previous works in anthropology have highlighted that those who end up excluded by the decision-making process may use informal mechanisms to challenge it (Gupta 1995). The concept of everyday resistance (Scott 1985, 1977), because it appears to happen randomly or irregularly, is usually opposed to visible, public actions of resistance. But when these are performed by a sufficient number of actors, regardless of whether the performers are aware of it or even if they see it as a casual, sporadic, and individual-based action that only applies only to their particular situation, it has social significance (Polese 2009). Moreover, as stated in the introduction to this volume, what has remained largely unexplored is the grey zone that lies *in-between* these two foci (Bayat 1994; Hirschmann 1970). What I refer to here is the space between everyday, unorganized resistance, carried out mainly individually and with little awareness of, or interest in, similar actions, and the gathering of a substantial number of members of a given movement (social or political), that openly challenges the authorities, on a national or transnational arena. That is to say, it is the space in between exit (withdrawal) and voice (collective mobilization), the two ideal types of societal responses elaborated by Hirschman (1970).

I thus perceive resistance as *also* located in the *interstices* between those two spaces. As it will be further demonstrated, I thus apprehend resistance as a *process* or experience that happens along a *continuum*. Resistance is rarely a moment. It is a process that is often born and nurtured in personal reflections or deconstruction of imposed normalizations, which can translate into various actions depending on the context and power relations involved. These, in turn, continue to transform into other manifestations – including shifting back to the personal/individual, as well as connecting with others elsewhere and in other times (Smith D.E. 2007).

How then should scholars, document such social phenomena? In aiming to address this issue, this chapter has a two-fold goal. First, it questions the process of doing research on resistance and its impacts on the nature of the knowledge we hold of this concept by presenting what I chose to call the Feminist Framework for Research (FFR) and its pertinence for Resistance Studies. As studies on resistance are scattered around various disciplines, I stress that the field of Resistance Studies could benefit from a similar common epistemological framework for operationalizing research on resistance; one that takes into account the multiplicity and complexity of manifestations of resistance. Second, to highlight the implications of such principles on the field, this chapter presents new material to construct the case study of Single Moms’ resistance to traditional family organizations in Vietnam. As the family represents a crucial unit in the country’s new economic renovation plan (Doi Moi), the State used a large-scale family planning campaign to promote the unchallenged and

unchallengeable idea of a wealthy heterosexual, married couple with two children. However, for women, this has tied them even more to the household and increased the responsibilities ascribed to them. A situation that more and more Single Moms are refusing, which further challenges the model enforced by the State. I present this case study, first, by highlighting the epistemological framework that enabled capturing their experience of subordination, and, second, by exposing the ways in which they resist the dominant relations to which they are ascribed.

Researching Resistance With a Feminist Lens

Summarizing ‘feminist research’ is not the purpose of this chapter and is too complex to do justice in this short format. Instead, I will outline how feminist research shaped my work with Single Moms in Hanoi and will demonstrate the pertinence of such a demarche for the study of resistance in general. I created the label “Feminist Framework for Research” (FFR) because I did not wish to take individual feminist theories about doing research in isolation or to oppose them to each other. It is indeed the ontology of feminist research that was helpful in my work and which I wish to reflect upon here. Furthermore, it is important to understand that I developed such an understanding in a context where there were no Gender Studies program in any of the French speaking Universities in Belgium, where I lived and studied. The literature presented in this chapter is thus based on the one I encountered at that time. In other words, I document the epistemological reflection that emerged while I was doing my doctoral research, and which informed the case study I am reflexively digging through here.

The FFR includes a set of epistemological principles that guide the process of doing research, that are found throughout various feminist theories about the production of scientific knowledge. Far from a set of rules or steps to follow when doing research, the FFR rather entails core principles and commitments, that help make sure that subjects of research are respected, that research is tied to their lived experiences, and that knowledge production does not replicate relations of power. Feminist research is thus a vast terrain that has developed into several traditions about how to go about doing scientific research – such as Standpoint theories, Situated Knowledges, Post-colonial/Decolonial methodologies, Institutional Ethnography, etc. However, these all draw on similar fundamental principles. Consequently, inspired by the tradition of feminist research, my inquiry among Single Moms in Hanoi took as foundation the four following epistemological stances, which, I argue, are also relevant for the study of resistance.

First, a FFR entails deconstructing positivist epistemologies that led to the exclusion of women as subjects of inquiry and that construct the research design a priori based on previous theories and concepts (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004; Ollenburger & Moore 1992). As feminist scholars argue, domination in knowledge production takes its roots within the epistemological framework guiding the research. According to Hesse-Bieber *et al* (2004), epistemology is

“a philosophical theory that represents a fundamental belief system about who can be a knower and what can be known. The basic assumptions a researcher brings to bear on her or his research project will influence decisions including what to study (based on what *can* be studied) and how to conduct the research (based on who *can* be a knower and what *can* be known)” (5, emphasis original).

Positivism, which was developed in order to equip social sciences with research practices that pattern after the ones applied in the natural sciences, is the dominant, hegemonic epistemology in scientific discourse (Sprague & Kobrynowicz 2004). As Strega (2015) emphasizes, it takes its roots in the Eurocentric philosophical debates that constituted *Enlightenment* thought:

“During the Enlightenment, *science* and *knowledge* began to have the same meaning, and a clear demarcation was established between science and non-science. This binary division between scientific knowledge and all other types of knowledge is hierarchical. Non-scientific sources of knowledge, such as philosophy, folklore, mythology, old wives’ tales, and oral traditions, are understood to be less valuable than science because they measure their usefulness through means other than scientific standards of reliability and verifiability. These ways of knowing fail to follow the one ‘true’ path to knowledge prescribed by the Enlightenment: rigorous scientific methodology applied by a rational, neutral, and objective subject to the study of an object clearly positioned outside of himself. Thus, only science is positioned as capable of producing ‘truth’” (122).

This has created a system where only a specific set of research and knowledge is deemed reliable – because obtained following the codes established by positivist research tradition – and replicated ever since because new research in this tradition always relies and speaks to previous “validated” knowledge. Nevertheless, it invalidates marginal sources of knowledge or marginal thoughts and experience cannot be understood inside this frame of reasoning. Therefore, feminist researchers argue that this positivist system has created an important bias in its ethnocentrism, androcentrism, and, I would say, dominocentrism. As Strega (2015) again contends:

“The dominant worldview is not just one way to view the world; it is positioned as the most legitimate way to view the world, and as such, it is difficult to resist. But the existence of non-Eurocentric worldviews that resist the Western world’s hierarchical dualism, that alternatively posit that both existence and knowledge are contingent on others, the world, and other living entities, has important implications for researchers. For example, most Indigenous cultures define the basis of all knowledge as relationship: everyone and everything in the world is connected, and understanding these connections is the beginning of knowledge. Similarly, the Afrocentric worldview *Ubuntu*, or ‘I am because we are’, is about knowledge arising from relationship (Ladson-Billings, 2000)” (121-122).

For Resistance Studies, therefore, the FFR entails moving away from theories and concepts that often were constructed with a focus on power. For instance, a lot of the literature on protests or social movements is constructed around concepts of organization, leadership, or achievement, which were initially developed in the study and understanding of power, leading to a depiction of resistance in terms of “outcomes”. Resistance is usually given “validity” if it “succeeded” in overthrowing/removing the dominant body it was resisting. And anything that does not meet this outcome perspective has traditionally been left understudied or been disregarded as resistance (Smith K. 2016). However, as highlighted above, the recent wave of scholarly work on resistance emphasizes the importance of digging into any manifestation that is done in opposition to power, regardless of its ability to challenge it. If we want to understand resistance for what it is, this certainly implies viewing it in connection with the power relations at play. However, resistance can be analyzed by taking some distance from what we already know about power. In that perspective, Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) state that :

“[t]he purpose of critical research on resistance is to uncover and analyze unrecognized assumptions, power dynamics, discursive structures and social change potentials of different forms of resistance, guided by non-conventional intentions, actors, contexts and means. If that is going to be possible we need a scientific discourse on resistance that does not just have good theories, methodology and empirical studies, but one that is open enough to identify and incorporate unexpected resistance – one that is not so embedded in prevalent power discourses that it (unintentionally) silences the other” (38-39).

If most studies approaching resistance do so in a post-positivist and/or post-structuralist perspective, it is still essential that we pay attention to the “heritage” of Resistance Studies. Two decades ago, Abu-Lughod (1990) was already stressing similar concerns through these two questions:

“[f]irst, what is the relationship between scholarship or theorizing and the world-historical moment in which it takes place – why, at this particular time, are scholars from diverse disciplines and with extremely different approaches converging on the topic of resistance? Second, what is the ideological significance in academic discourses of projects that claim to bring to light the hitherto ignored or suppressed ways in which subordinate groups actively respond to and resist their situation?” (41).

We should therefore question the context from which Resistance Studies emerged, the literature it draws upon, and the concepts and theories that structure its understanding. More importantly, we must explore whether there is a need to critically question this heritage, or as Bleiker (2004) puts it:

“[i]nstead of continuously trying to fill the void left by the fallen God, I argue for a methodological approach that no longer searches for alternative Archimedean foundations. The complex and increasingly intertwined social dynamics of contemporary life require more than ever that one accepts ambiguities and deals with the inevitably contingent character of foundations. One must try to approach issues of transversal struggles and human agency by relying on various forms of insight and on multiple levels of analysis, even if they seem at times incompatible” (144).

Second, as a consequence of the previous break, the FFR deconstructs the principle of objectivity and the notion of “value-free” research, further recognizing the subjectivity and underlying goals of the researcher. After analyzing existing scientific knowledge through a feminist lens, various scholars from various disciplines (see Bleier 1984; Fausto-Sterling 1985; Irigaray 1987; Keller 1984) came to realize that “the goal of removing subjectivities has never been met. All observations are ‘theory-laden’; that is, making any observation requires the acceptance of background assumptions – a system of beliefs to interpret what we are seeing” (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 2004, 79). If we are interested in structural change, this has implications in terms of how social organizations are dependent on or founded upon these allegedly “objective, therefore scientific, studies”. For instance, with regards to policy making, Strega (2015) stresses that :

“Because scientific knowledge is promoted as bias-free, it has been positioned as the best kind of knowledge for tasks that require prediction and control, such as making law and policy. Law’s reliance on apparently neutral knowledge substantiates its claims to impartiality, making it very difficult to challenge the role of law in creating and maintaining inequalities” (122-123).

Thus, the idea that “reality” or “truth” can be discovered is deconstructed, as these notions tend to reinforce a hierarchical dualism of good versus bad science and, as stated above, were constructed in order to impose a worldview onto any others. Instead, central to feminist research is the importance given to emotions and subjective experiences (Hill Collins 2000). Therefore, feminist research proposes another understanding of rigour, one that lies in the acknowledgement of the situatedness of a research project:

“I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives. I am arguing for the view from a

body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (Haraway 1988, 589).

What Haraway has brought to partial perspectives is the idea that understanding and making visible a researcher’s position allows her/him/they to discover what would have not been so otherwise. Subjective experiences, emotions, or perceptions are thus apprehended as opportunities, instead of barriers, for understanding (Davies & Spencer 2010, Koefoed 2017). Although many scholars in Resistance Studies acknowledge wearing the scholar-activist hat and concede that any research project is always a political one (Törnberg 2017), there still lacks a debate on positionality and privilege of the researcher, which has an influence even while being a sympathizer of the cause under study.

Third, the FFR entails locating power relations that are at play in the production of knowledge. The way research is traditionally conducted, with a clear distance between the researcher and the researched, perpetuates relations of differential power, carrying a risk of abuse and exploitation. Consequently, the FFR strives to conduct research collaboratively with the subjects of inquiry, starting from their lives and experiences of subordination and taking into account intersectional categories of difference that are at play: “one must start one’s thought, one’s research project, from outside those conceptual schemes and the activities that generate them; one must start from the lives excluded as origins of their design – from ‘marginal lives’ ” (Harding 1995, 342). A framework for studying resistance could thus draw inspiration from the standpoint approach elaborated by feminist scholars trying to grasp the realities of marginal and oppressed groups. This would be based on the precept that because of their position, subordinates hold an understanding of both their condition and that of the dominant class. As Strega (2015) stresses,

“if we accept the idea that all truth claims are perspectival and partial, how can research provide a secure rationale for progressive politics? I believe that socially just researchers must align themselves with the idea of epistemic privilege (...). When we privilege knowledge, and knowledge construction, along marginalized gender, race, or class lines (to name a few), then we are finally able to speak this truth: we live in a system of domination and subordination that differentially benefits most White men over most Women and most racialized people, and that privileges the White, Western world over the global south.” (132-133)

In this perspective, the concept of standpoint

“structures epistemology in a particular way. Rather than a simple dualism, it posits a duality of levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the ‘surface’ or appearance, and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality” (Harding, 1987, 160).

Therefore, within the FFR, people are considered as active subjects of research that should participate in the whole process of scientific production: “standpoints are achieved by groups who struggle collectively and self-reflectively against the matrix of domination that circumscribes their lives” (Naples 2007, 586). The idea is thus to position the co-creation of meaning as an epistemological condition for transformation, for countering patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial traditions of producing science and knowledge, and proposing a different narrative, one that emerges from the margins (Motta & Seppälä 2016).

Finally, the fourth principle entails that the FFR acknowledges and embraces a militant goal for research. The ultimate goal of knowledge production is aimed at social change, and social change that is thought and produced with, achievable by, and useful for the targeted subject of research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli 2007). Not only by committing to return the results

of research to the subjects of study, but also aiming at building knowledge that intends to be empowering and useful for them (Haraway 1988, Harding 2009, Mohanty 2003; Ollivier & Tremblay, 2000; Smith L.T. 1999; Spivak, 2009; Sprague 2005). Even more so, feminist afroepistemology envisages the production of knowledge “to liberate, empower and *foster resistance*” (Allan 2017, 94 emphasis added). These principles then snow ball onto methodologies and methods of inquiry (multiple, interdisciplinary and intersectional) freed from androcentric and ethnocentric biases by deconstructing the way of elaborating research questions, problematics, the process of interviewing and going about collecting data (see for instance, Smith D.E. 1987, 2006).

The idea that the production of knowledge be envisaged in an aim to come to practical use is a point already put forth by most scholars among the recent wave in Resistance Studies working with the ambition to empower resistance communities and/or sharpen the tools available to resisters (Törnberg 2017; Strega & Brown 2015). As put forth by Stierl (2018), “where to look” is often closely connected with “what to do”. Yet I contend that, instead of having individual scholars speaking about their positionality and militant/activist aim(s), it would be more useful to the field if the emancipatory and liberating aim of doing research on resistance be approached as an epistemological principle, along with the other ones describes above, guiding research in Resistance Studies *a priori*.

Exploring the Case of Single Moms in Hanoi

These four principles thus gradually served as the basis for my research with Single Moms in Hanoi. I actually was drawn to this inquiry whilst already on the field. I had initially organized my trip to Vietnam with the aim to observe everyday forms of resistance and had targeted, through my interactions with the University supervising me, several groups of people I planned to exchange with – Single Moms were not one of them. It is thus through my various conversations and encounters that I realized that an increasing number of women were deciding to depart from or refuse the traditional organization of the family and becoming “Single Moms”¹ – be it after a divorce, an unwanted pregnancy they decided to pursue on their own, or a deliberate choice to get pregnant and raise their child on their own. Single Moms are thus a marginalized and understudied² group of people, struggling with several power relations to which they are ascribed.

In order to conduct research in a horizontal way on a sensitive matter in a very bureaucratic and surveilled country like Vietnam, one has to be creative. Traditionally, fieldwork needs to be sponsored by a State approved organism (in my case, the University), which is key in order to obtain a proper Visa for the stay. In addition, a request to come to a village to conduct research has to be submitted to the local authorities (Popular Committee) and to the local police. Their permission is marked by the “Red Stamp” so dearly yearned for by researchers. Once granted access, one needs to present oneself upon arrival and give elaborate personal information (Scott et al, 2005). Interview guides need to be approved in advance as well, and authorities often select the interviewees themselves. They also send a local government officer to accompany the researcher during interviews to make sure that everything is happening according to what has been approved. Finally, this whole process is usually marked by monetary constraints and bribery with the various actors. This also holds for

1 I use the term “Single Moms” throughout my work because it is the appellation they chose for themselves. They preferred “single mom” in opposition to “single mother” because it has a more “modern” ring to it (see Murru, 2016).

2 Apart from a study by Harriet Phinney (2003) on older single women who “asked for a child” – meaning they were considered too old to marry and asked a man to impregnate them, no strings attached – the subject of Single Moms in Hanoi had not been studied.

translators, which need to be preapproved and remunerated (Scott et al 2005, Turner 2013). Conducting research in Vietnam is thus marked by huge administrative constraints, heavy negotiation, and generally a loss of autonomy.

In my case, as I decided to learn more about a very stigmatized group of people, it was imperative to avoid those hierarchical constraints. The good relation I had built with several professors – in particular with one professor I regularly exchanged with and who had interest in my willingness to investigate the case of Single Moms – helped me to peacefully renegotiate my collaboration with the University (which had made my extended stay possible). In exchange of my cooperation in teaching seminars, they agreed to let me conduct my research among Single Moms on the side, meaning it was not a University-sponsored research anymore and therefore, escaping any form of surveillance. Most of my encounters happened in a very informal way (over coffee or a meal), and through a snowball effect, thus without prior bureaucratic authorizations. Even when I went to rural communes, I always was introduced through a friend in the form of an informal meal so no prior authorization to local authorities was asked. In addition, I mobilized two (female) friends as translators who were sensitive to the struggles Single Moms faced, which avoided having a third party (un)consciously portraying judgement towards these women. It is also important to note that I benefitted from the country's opening to the global internet (even if surveilled to some extent – most of the young generation mastered the use of proxies to access the information they were looking for) which made it easy to get in touch with various Single Moms. So, in the end, the fact that I sort of stumbled upon the subject of Single Moms had the added advantage that I was able to function outside of the surveillance radar. I always wondered throughout my journey if at some point some officials were going to ask questions about my work, but I was lucky enough this never happened (for more details about managing surveillance and protection of participants during the study, see Murru 2016).

However, one key moment in this process happened when I decided to stop searching for resistance. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, my traditional academic training had taught me to start from concepts and theories and search for specific forms of resistance. This was blocking me from actively listening to their experience as Single Moms in its entirety. I thus realized I had to shift my lens from searching for a specific form of resistance, to understanding their condition of subordination, what implications it had on their daily lives, and what problematics they formulated based on their experience. Thus the approach changed: I was no longer starting from my preconceived knowledge about resistance and searching for something that would fit the pattern/categories I had in my mind, but rather letting them teach me about their understanding of domination and power relations and see where that would take me. I thus had to leave 'resistance' aside to actually see it more extensively at work, in their daily lives, and through their eyes.

My understanding of Single Mom's realities in Hanoi followed a very inductive process, gradually co-constructing meaning as I encountered more and more Single Moms. This collaborative process was done through several ways. I conducted in-depth interviews, following a life course narrative, with 43 Single Moms (in 2014 and 2015) and did participant observation with two of them. Methodologically, active listening was thus central. In other words, alongside listening to their stories, I also paid attention to their desires and needs. For instance, several Single Moms I met with asked if I could put them in touch with the other ones participating in the research – since most of their interactions with women experiencing similar realities were done in a virtual form with social media. So I quickly organized informal gatherings with the women who agreed, and we collectively discussed about their condition and experiences. Throughout this process, which was intended to unearth a problematic that mattered to them and grasp their collective standpoint, I had several feedback loops with some

of these Single Moms with whom I met several times, to see if what I took out of my encounters made sense for them. The questions on my part that emerged after listening to their narrative were systematically brought back to the group to further be discussed, challenged, and/or acknowledged. This was also an effort to target where my positioning and privilege we getting into the way of an understanding.

Furthermore, these extended exchanges with these Single Moms lead to the organization (together) of an “Offline Event” – meaning we reached out on several online platforms Single Moms were using, and invited them to meet physically. Space does not allow a detailed description of this event, but it is worth mentioning that this simple gathering developed, in the years following, into the creation of shelters around Hanoi to welcome and accommodate Single Moms and their children who are temporarily without housing solutions, and, if needed, further propose vocational trainings to help them find a job (see Murru 2016 and coinsforchange.net³).

Single Mom’s resistance

How did all of this inform me about their resistance? I concur with scholars that consider that if power relations are at play, we are often bound to discover some form of resistance among subordinates. The research process I described helped me understand the whole matrix of the realities and struggles faced by Single Moms in Hanoi, and understand their resistance in a new way. In the end, I did not observe *one* form of resistance, I observed several – or rather, I discovered an *experience* of resistance that is manifested and linked to power relations in three different spheres of their lives.

First, in the private sphere, I became curious of the fact that these Single Moms were very insistent on the notion that they were “happy” – the vocabulary around the theme of happiness was very consistent throughout their narrative. This might seem irrelevant at first but, digging deeper, I realized that this was linked to a 30-yearlong propaganda orchestrated by the State in an effort to promote the “Happy Family” model. Indeed, in 1986, realizing the failure of its planned economic policies and to become competitive on the international scene, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam decided on a major turn in its economic policy through an opening towards the global market economy (called Doi Moi). This transition, however, did not happen naturally. After decades of war and communism where the Vietnamese people had usually been encouraged towards modesty, the State needed to create an incentive for consumption among its citizens. Since “the family” was considered to be the ideal economic unit that would ensure the consumption of new goods and services, helping the new economic plan to succeed, the State developed a national family planning campaign designed to encourage the new model of a modern, progressive family. The National Committee for Population and Family Planning was thus created to conduct this large-scale propaganda, the “Happy Family Campaign” (HFC), promoting the unchallenged and unchallengeable idea of a wealthy heterosexual, married couple with two children, as the fundamental unit of the Vietnamese society (Phinney 2005, 2008a, 2008b). In this context, it became relevant that Single Moms were then deconstructing and reappropriating for themselves this narrative of the Happy Family, further resisting the dominant narrative enforced by the State. Since the propaganda enforced that one could only be happy inside the model they proposed, Single Moms could only

3 Coins for Change (C4C) is a social enterprise that aids disenfranchised women and children throughout Vietnam. For more info, see : <http://www.coinsforchange.net/aboutus>

be envisaged as sad, depressed, struggling and failing in life. In a country where the concept of “face” is culturally central, one can understand the weight of this stigma (Nguyen Khac Vien 2014). Embodying happiness actually meant for them to discredit this idea:

For example clients, they see me very happy, they say I am a good worker, but later when they hear I am Single Mom, they say “oh that’s why she looks so sad” (...) Why can they not accept that I am happy?” (Ha, 26/01/2015)

Second, becoming a Single Mom is in itself a huge public confrontation of the traditional institution of the family. Still today, women are severely subordinated inside the patriarchal family structure (Shueler et al 2006). Among others, patrilineality is a very strong value in Vietnamese culture because men are the ones in charge of ancestor worshiping. It is therefore crucial for each family to bear a son, and wives, facing strong pressures from their in-laws, only become valuable to them once they give birth to a boy (Bélanger 2002). This was reinforced by the HFC, as it relied on an understanding of maternity to which women are subordinated, mothers being considered the guardians and protectors of family harmony. Furthermore, mothers are supposed to oversee the education of their child(ren), understood as the upbringing of the next generation of citizens (Phinney 2003). Since the State’s project highly depended on motherhood, it developed an essentialist definition of what it means to be a woman, linking it to her “natural destiny” of becoming a mother. This essentializing discourse can be found everywhere, in the body of law, as well as in the communication of institutions devoted to women and the scientific studies they conduct (Barry 1996; Drummond 2006; Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978; Werner, 2004). This means that, as the Vietnamese society modernized itself, and women were encouraged to find jobs, the responsibilities ascribed to them were increased in parallel and they found themselves even more tied to the household and the duties ascribed to family care. This is the very situation that more and more women are therefore refusing. This has translated, with regards to married women, into a high increase in divorce rates in the country, and, with regards to the younger generation, into an increasing rejection of the institution of marriage in itself.

Paradoxically, for Single Moms, as they become freed from constraints linked to living with the family-in-law⁴, they find themselves having more time and money to participate in various leisure activities such as going out for coffee or to the cinema with friends (for a more detailed explanation of why their socio-economic status improves, see Murru 2018). As these activities are considered to be reserved to young unmarried girls, Single Moms are thus occupying new spaces and temporalities that are normally not suitable for “mothers”. Their visibility on the public place further contributes to nurture the debate on the increase of Single Moms. For example, this issue used to be taboo and Single Moms had a tendency to hide from others; now, it is common to “know” a Single Mom, whether she is a family member, a colleague, or a neighbour (Murru 2017). In this perspective,

“[t]heir initiative to find happiness for themselves is one step towards changing the traditional psychology of women’s inferiority complex, their passivity, and their tendency to hide secret feelings and aspirations to a point of taking the initiative to affirm their right to happiness (...) From a place of accepting, being shy, timid, and bashful, or maintaining one’s virginity and faithfulness... to a place where they display boldness to dare to destroy inferior feelings, to dare to preserve individual happiness” (Nguyen Thi Khoa 1996, 131).

⁴ Traditionally, when a couple marries, they go live with the parents of the husband and the wife takes on the chores her mother-in-law used to do.

By embodying a different lifestyle, Single Moms are thus resisting patriarchal stigma and proposing a different vision of what it entails to be a mother.

Finally, these forms of resistance, located in their private as well as public spheres, are also linked to and nurturing manifestations of resistance located in a translocal social sites. There are a number of ‘Single Mom forums’, as well as Facebook groups and pages, designed for exchange on various topics of their lives. I observed that they use the Internet and social media to recreate a community of solidarity in response to the ostracism they often face (be it from family members, in the workplace or in other spheres of their existence). For instance, Single Moms in Hanoi enjoyed exchanging with other Single Moms in Ho Chi Minh City about how they coped with daily difficulties, and “importing” helpful ideas. This virtual communication then has the effect of strengthening the legitimacy of their choice to live life differently and, as it was mentioned in the previous section, it led to further increase “offline” gatherings, eventually rendering this virtual community physical and embodied.

My exchanges with Single Moms in Hanoi thus allowed me to capture an *experience of resistance* to various power relations to which they are ascribed. This manifestation of resistance could not have been understood or categorized into a single “form”, as it is linked to the political, cultural, and structural contexts they face. It is not just private or “everyday resistance”, nor is it only public refusal; it is both at the same time. In addition, this is neither purely individual resistance, nor is it entirely collective; it resides somewhere in between. It is characteristic of subalternity. Subaltern lives are visible yet blurred, audible yet silenced, and therefore, their resistance is also complex and traverses their spheres of existence. (Motta & Seppälä 2016). Therefore, I believe that the findings I presented in this chapter are strongly dependent on the epistemological and methodological frame that guided my research. It is by forcing myself to remain open and to actively listen to their narratives in their entirety (leaving aside categories/definitions of resistance established by others), and including them in the process of knowledge construction, that I was able to grasp how they experience resistance.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed at a reflection about “researching resistance”. The choice to rely on the tools of feminist research was motivated by the realization of the lack of an epistemological framework that guides the operationalization of studies on resistance. Given the aim to produce knowledge that unveils and challenges power relations, empowers subordinates, and aims at social change, it is important to make sure that the research design does not become an obstacle towards these objectives. Based on similar preoccupations in the fields of Gender Studies and Resistance Studies – unveiling and rehabilitating categories of subjects that had been left out of scientific inquiry *and* targeting complex configurations of domination and power relations in order to understand how subjects can effectively challenge them – I demonstrated the relevance of adapting the FFR to the study of resistance.

Departing from previous theories and concepts, and approaching the research design as a co-creating process, my case study among Single Moms in Hanoi highlighted that they are challenging different power relations through various means and multiple social spaces. Embracing the fact that I stand in solidarity with them, and allowing this to guide the research process has opened up opportunities for emancipation. However, it is not my aim to essentialize or romanticize Single Mom’s experience. It is worth mentioning that my study also revealed that, as they are challenging specific power relations, they are also reinforcing others. For instance, through their reappropriation of “happiness”, they are strengthening the notion that “happiness” is ascribed to motherhood, even if it is a different model of motherhood than the one enforced by the State. Therefore, excluded from this “happiness” are single women who do

not have children (Bélanger 2004; Bélanger, & Khuat Thu Hong 2002). Moreover, Single Moms' occupation of new spaces and temporalities is done via the consumption of new capitalist goods and services, which ultimately contributes to the State's initial plan to encourage consumerism (Murru, 2018). This is to say that resistance is never "pure" and it should not be generalized as the "noble" counterpart of power relations. Since resistance is always present in a dynamic interaction with a multitude of power relations, it also holds the ability to strengthen some forms of power while it is resisting others (Vinhagen & Lilja 2007). Nevertheless, my work emphasized that, when starting inquiry within the daily lives of subordinates and conducting research collaboratively with them, we are provided with a more situated, complete, and complex understanding of their resistance, one that emerges from the margins.

As we try to go further in the conceptualization of resistance and the development of the field of Resistance Studies, there is thus a crucial need, first, to give more space to empirical case studies that document resistance happening in the daily lives of subordinates – as studies still tend to over focus on public, visible forms of resistance. Second, it is crucial to observe how resistance located in the private sphere connects to other manifestations happening in public and "translocal" social spaces. Third, the construction of a comprehensive framework for the study of resistance needs to be sharpened. My study among Single Moms in Hanoi represents one example of how useful the FFR can be to understand resistance. However, there surely is a need to confront my work as well, with other case studies covering different subjects and contexts, and employing a variety of different methods in the process.

Moreover, it should be highlighted that other scholars (see for instance Strega & Brown 2015, and Motta & Seppälä 2016) go further into this epistemological critique, exploring *queering feminist decoloniality*, or *feminist post-structuralism* more in-depth, and formulating an even more liberating framework than the one I propose, and which I fully support. In a similar fashion, documenting *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe* Stierl (2018) proposes an ethnography of struggle, in which he contends that method "can be understood differently, as an enactment of critical theory by a relational, situated, and subjective being. Method is political and performative, creatively producing realities (...). Often thought as something constraining, method can be a practice of opening up social phenomena rather than reducing their complexities to simplifying formulas" (17). Other traditions of knowledge building, such as Indigenous Research of Critical Race theorists are also great resources to further deepen this idea of an epistemology for researching resistance. Here, I stayed true to the experience I lived in my Hanoian research and to the discussion that emerged from the field about epistemologies and theories of resistance. Since then, I contend that more work needs to be done and an even deeper deconstruction is needed, in line with the above, in order to possibly envisage research *as* resistance and a liberated understanding *of* resistance (part of this reflection can be founded in the Ending Remarks of this volume).

This chapter serves to further encourage this debate among Resistance Studies. I believe that further conceptualizing resistance will depend on our commitment, as researchers in Resistance Studies, to an epistemological framework that will ensure we conduct our work in a liberating perspective, being attentive to the power relations that also surround our work in the production of knowledge. This entails: (1) using a critical approach towards theories and concepts – including paying attention to the domination of "popular" subjects in Resistance Studies which are easy to study, leaving aside categories of resisters that don't "fit the frame", and that also produce a Western understanding of resistance by overtly focusing on protest that happens in places where it is allowed; (2) research should start from the roots, from the ones that know best about their condition as subordinates and the power relations they are embedded in; (3) we should acknowledge the militant purpose of doing research on resistance, which aims

at constructing knowledge that has the possibility to be empowering, liberating, and leading to social change. As subordinates prove to be creative in the means they develop to resist various power relations, we too as researchers have yet to be creative in the way we make sense of, and translate into concrete actions, the knowledge of resistance we make visible. This chapter thus calls for the debate about an ontological and epistemological framework for Resistance Studies.