

The Values and Attitudes of Youth in Vietnam

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Introduction and Setting

Vietnam has experienced a period of economic liberalization and greater integration with global markets since 1986. These events have far-reaching implications for society as a whole and for youth in particular. For example, among youth aged 15-24, school attendance has almost doubled and the proportion that are married has nearly halved during the short time between 1993 and 1998. Furthermore, wage earnings have increased substantially, but not equally across all regions, thereby creating strong incentives for migration. These changes, generally attributable to the positive impetus of economic growth, are also arguably associated with changing values and attitudes amongst Vietnamese youth.

Youth faced with the rapidly changing environment are negotiating their role in family and society. It is feared that youth today no longer value the traditional ways and are thus more likely to engage in risky behavior including premarital sex and drug use. The extent to which this is true is uncertain, however. Are the values that youth today hold, different based on exposure to greater opportunities? And if values have changed are they at all associated with riskier behavior? This paper will explore the relationship between risky behavior and values by exploring differences amongst youth across different living arrangements. A recent study by Gammeltoft 2000 found that the situation is more complex than at first glance. While youth may be engaged in riskier behavior, they still retain some traditional values.

An examination of the social consequences of economic change for the adolescent population will aid the country in formulating effective youth policies, which will have important ramifications for the country, particularly since economic change is likely to remain a facet of today's world. Furthermore with Vietnam's young age structure, it is important to understand current values and attitudes of youth to best ensure continued prosperity in the country and to reduce the likelihood of negative risky behavior.

With data describing the multi-faceted ways in which young people are experiencing Vietnam's economic development, we examine objective experiences and the subjective perspectives of our respondents to understand the interplay between the expansion of new opportunities and values. We examine differences between youth aged 15-29 by geographic mobility to understand the extent to which exposure to differing opportunities influences the attitudes of youth. The study pays particular attention to how young people negotiate emerging realities in terms of new household arrangements and interpersonal

relationships. We also situate the values and attitudes of the youth in relation to a same sex parent to provide greater context to understanding the values and attitudes of the youth interviewed.

Data and Methods

We use data collected in 2003 by the Population Council and the Institute of Sociology in Hanoi. The goal of the study was to investigate the lives of adolescents in a range of economic and environmental conditions during a time in Vietnam when aspirations were rising, and the health and well being of young people was believed to be threatened. The Institute collected three rounds of data from individuals in four communes that were purposively selected according to their level of development, two were in the North and two were in the South.

Two of these communes, in Gia Lam and Dong Nai districts, were rapidly growing rural villages with high levels of infrastructural development, in-migration, and economic diversity. The two other communes in the study are in Hung Yen and Ben Tre districts. These districts were chosen from primarily agricultural areas characterized by high out-migration and low economic diversity. To better understand the opportunities available within these communities, we completed a detailed community profile with key informants from each community. We then selected four hundred households randomly, one hundred per commune, with at least one person between the ages of 15 and 29 in each household. The data from this sample provide a demographic and economic profile of the area. We then chose thirty households randomly from each community to follow more intensively.

Within these one hundred and twenty households, we collected time use data and constructed detailed life history matrices from youth aged 15-29. We also collected life history matrices from their parents to facilitate intergenerational comparisons. Finally we conducted in-depth interviews and a structured questionnaire with the youth to better understand their behavior, values, attitudes, and aspirations.

We conducted three rounds of data collection. In the last round, we added additional respondents to capture differences associated with geographic mobility. We purposively interviewed permanent migrants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that were still considered members of the one hundred and twenty households previously interviewed. In this way, we gathered data based on migration status to further assess the differences in values, attitudes and aspirations based on differential opportunities and experiences. We thus collected information from permanent migrants, temporary migrants, and non-migrants.

This paper investigates the values and attitudes of youth in an environment of economic change. We will draw out similarities and differences amongst youth based on a variety of factors including but not limited to geographic mobility, gender, and age group. The mix of quantitative and qualitative data allow us to capture the complexity of understanding one's values.

Preliminary Findings

Youth are adapting traditional values to their changing world. While not completely abandoning previous practices and belief structures, they are making slight changes to fit their new situation. For example we found a youth asserting her independence while still showing respect to her elders. This youth adapted the communication process so that she could disagree with her mother without seeming to be disrespectful. We look at this behavior in greater detail with the use of hypothetical situations to understand the extent to which the interactions between youth and their elders are changing.

Youth who are permanently living in urban, off-farm employment are exposed to new influences but they do not clearly hold differing values than youth who only temporarily live in urban areas, or even than those that live in rural areas. Furthermore, youth that engage in greater personal risk, are not necessarily the individuals that hold the least traditional values. The paper will examine in greater depth the associations between geographic mobility, risky behavior, and value change.

Bibliography

Gammeltoft, Tine. 2001. "Between "Science" and "Superstition": Moral Perceptions of Induced Abortion Among Young Adults in Vietnam," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*: 1-26