

‘Captive’ subjects? Highly educated Cambodians and higher education policymaking in ‘postcolonial’ Cambodia

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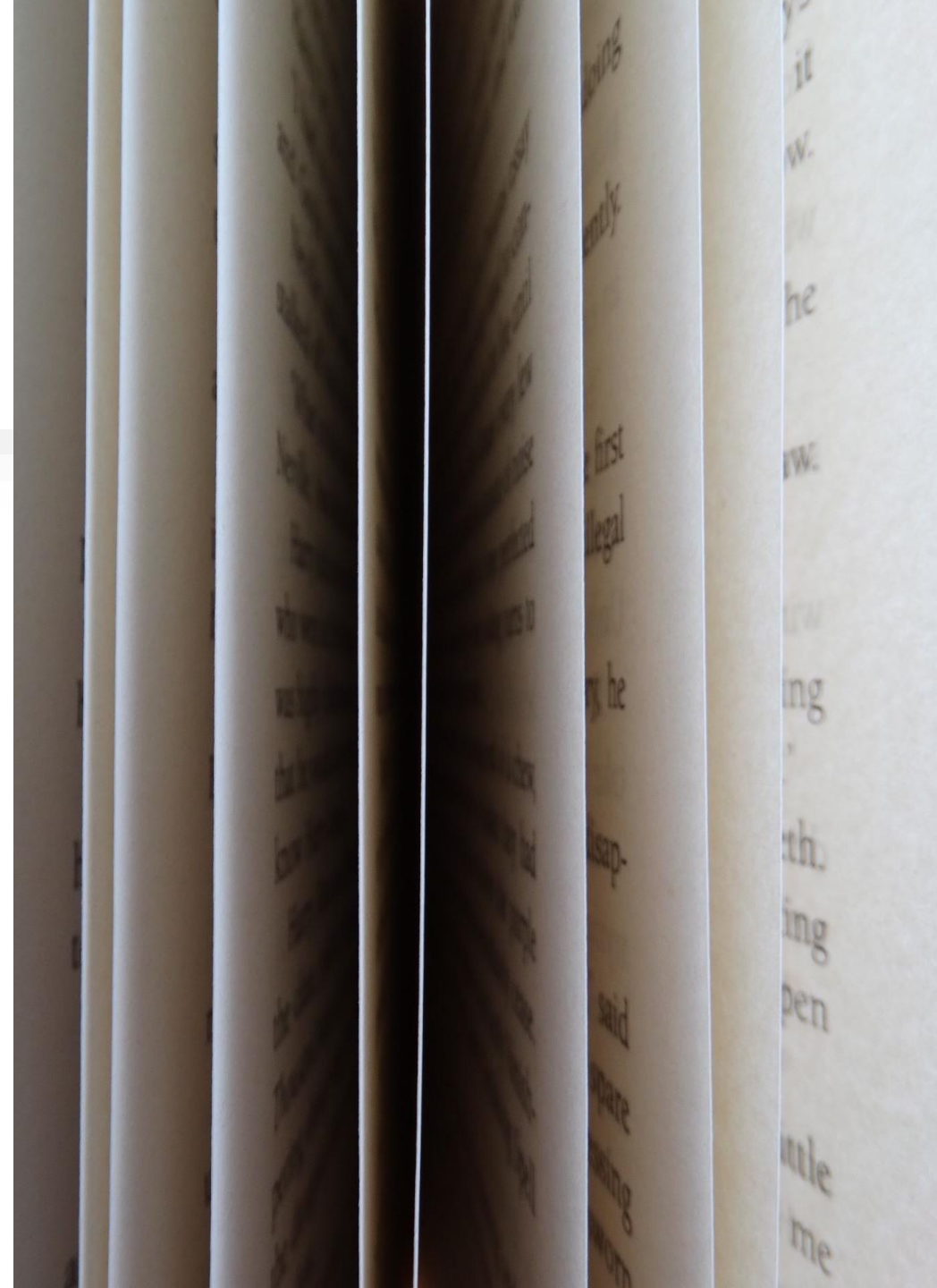


Outline

- Points of departure
- Conceptual perspectives
- Research methods
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- Concluding thoughts

Points of departure

- Two bodies of scholarship
 - Postcolonial and coloniality studies (Fanon, 1967; Grosfoguel, 2002, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Quijano, 2007)
 - Globalized neoliberalism and hegemonic influences of international organizations in perpetuating the colonial conditions and the globalized Eurocentric policy discourse (Klees, Samoff, & Stromquist, 2012; Shahjahan, 2016)
- Cambodia as a 'postcolonial' society
- Increased participation in higher education reforms by highly educated Cambodians trained at 'Western' universities



The question

How do these highly educated Cambodians, armed with 'Western' education, navigate the complexity of 'postcolonial' context and exercise their agency as they try to make contributions to Cambodia's higher education reforms?



Conceptual perspectives

- Mechanisms of responsabilization (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017)
 - appeal of freedom
 - threat to personal control
 - Learned helplessness
 - Psychological reactance
- Resistance through politics in subjectivation (Youdell, 2006)



Research methods

- Semi-structured interviews (40-70 minutes) with 13 key informants (KIs), one woman, between June-August 2022
- KIs: researchers, national consultants/technical advisors, & ministry officials previously or currently engaged in projects focused on Cambodia's higher education reforms
- KIs holding a master's (4) or doctoral degree (9) from overseas universities
- Projects funded through grants and/or loans from international organizations (IOs), particularly the World Bank

Findings




Four forms of subjectivity

‘This is a possible panacea for all ills’

‘Perhaps I’ll make more impactful contributions elsewhere’

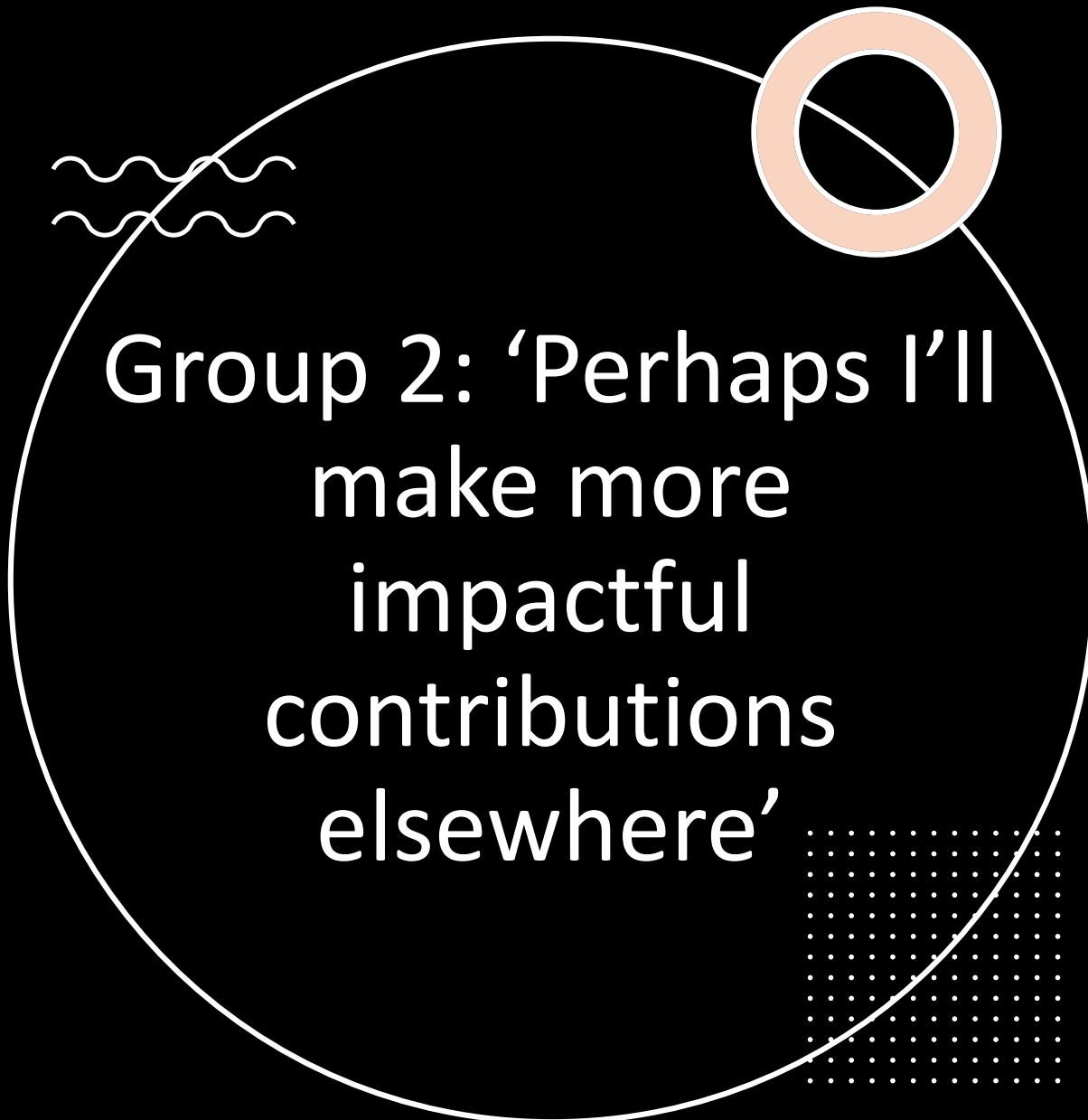

‘I’ll do my best—for now’

‘We’ll have to complete this task by that year’



Group 1: 'This is a possible panacea for all ills'

- Tend to be inspired by the appeal of freedom
- Critical of the existing practices
- "Don't re-invent the wheel!" Adopt, adapt, modify 'Western' knowledge to cure all ills
- Focus on the short-term fix, not the long-term consequences of adopting 'Western' knowledge
- Exercise agency through less participation in the system but more in research, analysis, and publications to promote 'remedies' to fix the ills



Group 2: 'Perhaps I'll make more impactful contributions elsewhere'

- Tend to be influenced by 'learned helplessness,' but not in terms of 'silent conformity'
- Critical of both the existing practices and the 'Western' knowledge system
- Critical of other educated Cambodians for not being critical enough of the 'Western' knowledge system
- Exercise agency/resistance by walking away and engaging in something else considered more meaningful and impactful (private sector, teaching)



Group 3: 'I'll do my best—for now'

- Tend to be influenced by psychological reactance
- Awareness of the long-term implications of using 'Western' knowledge to fix the ills in the system, but confronted with shortage of 'better' alternatives
- Exercise agency through trying to be 'change agents'
- On the verge of transitioning to Group 2 (walking away due to increasing sense of learned helplessness)

Group 4: 'We'll have to complete this task by that year'

- Tend to be 'obedient' implementers of things on the 'to-do' list
- Checklist-oriented
- 'Sitting on the fence' position in relation to critiques of existing practices or 'Western' knowledge
- Tend to demonstrate learned helplessness ('silent conformity' or 'taming of resistance') → complacent
- Do not demonstrate any particular agentic disposition



Concluding thoughts

- Increasing local engagement and ownership, particularly in the most recent decade
- Making contributions to the reform efforts within the bounds of existing constraining forces
- Awareness of the implications of adopting Eurocentric, neoliberal policy discourses, perceived to be 'better' than the existing practices
- Limited resources & projects → limited opportunities to explore alternatives as widely and critically as possible
- Increasing feelings of learned helplessness (unable to effect change) → indifference and complacency



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