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Affective Expertise: The Gendered Emotional Labor of Social Work and the Naturalization of Class Difference in Hồ Chí Minh City

In a diary submitted for a fourth-year practicum course at a Hồ Chí Minh City university in the fall of 2010, Tuyết, an undergraduate student, described her potential client. The client was twenty-one years old, unhoused, nine months pregnant, using injected opioids, and dependent on the income her husband generated through stealing. Tuyết faulted her client for living only in the moment and concluded that her client needed instruction on how to take care of herself and her child. The client needed a plan, the first step of which would be to learn how to plan.

In another diary entry written several days later, Tuyết reported that her practicum supervisor reminded her that social workers do not tell clients what to do. Instead, Tuyết was to help her client identify and analyze the client's own problems as the first step in determining for herself what she wanted to do. The bottom line, according to the supervisor, was that Tuyết should "help [her] client develop self-determination and avoid having her depend on [Tuyết]."¹

These excerpts from the diary of an undergraduate social work student point to the dilemmas faced in the second decade of the twenty-first century by both a growing underclass in Vietnam and the emerging corps of

professionals attempting to assist them. The development of a “market economy with socialist orientation” [*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*], or “market socialism,” has involved a process of socialization [*xã hội hóa*] in which individuals are supposed to become responsabilized decision-makers who apply principles of logic, maximization, and self-investment in their own lives. Socialization resembles privatization, in that it involves the transfer of welfare concerns from the state to private entities, but the term resonates with earlier socialist expectations that individual actions should promote the collective good.² As a result, socialization grafts the more novel, and ostensibly foreign, notion of individual self-interest as the engine of economic growth onto prior socialist histories and long-cherished Vietnamese values of moral responsibility for the well-being of family, community, and broader society.³

Although socialization has become a key theme in government policies related to health care and education,⁴ the supervisor’s response to Tuyết’s judgment that her client needed to learn how to plan made an important point: this form of entrepreneurial personhood should not be imposed upon individuals. Instead, it needed to emerge through an iterative, interactive process in which a client would affirmatively adopt this model of selfhood because it is the most efficacious. Tuyết’s diary excerpt thus encapsulates how entrepreneurial personhood in Vietnam has been emerging through a biopolitical model of therapeutic governance: a growing body of expertise promoted via a wide range of public and private programming that exhorts citizens to engage in psychologically informed processes of self-analysis and self-improvement in order to cultivate forms of behavior and moral decision-making in their daily lives that will enhance the nation’s overall health, security, and material well-being.⁵

As I conducted ethnographic research with practicing and academic professional social workers, as well as the university students whom they were training, another key dimension of the emergence of therapeutic governance in Vietnam became readily apparent: it has placed the burden of nurturing entrepreneurial personhood disproportionately on women in ways that are also clearly classed. Vietnamese women in general have had to combine public labor in the workforce—something promoted during an earlier form of socialism—with the private affective labor of managing the

household, which is increasingly defined under the market economy as both an emotional and economic unit.⁶ This private work includes socializing children to develop productive forms of personhood. In these efforts, urban middle-class wives and mothers have increasingly sought advice from a burgeoning self-help industry.⁷ Meanwhile, state-sponsored programs show working-class women how to manage a “cultured family” in which children go to school, parents respect each other, and the home provides a sufficient material foundation to foster healthy child development.⁸

Women such as Tuyết’s client have been left out of these formulations. They lack the basic necessities of food, shelter, and health care. They fall prey to “social evils” [*tệ nạn xã hội*]⁹—sex work, substance abuse, human trafficking—with devastating effects, particularly for their young children. As Tuyết’s diary suggests, the observation that this underclass lacks financial resources can easily slide into a moralizing claim that they also lack knowledge about how to live their lives or raise their children. The first step of social work intervention, therefore, is often a pedagogical one—acting on the assumption that the poor need guidance so that they, too, can become responsabilized. Here as well, women perform this nurturing, affective labor—not as family members, but as trained experts in the feminized field of professional social work.

Vietnam is by no means unique in experiencing a movement toward therapeutic governance that applies psychological expertise through a hierarchy of gendered and classed affective labor. Commenting on this global trend during a roundtable on feminist anthropology at the 2017 meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Carla Freeman argued that gendered and classed dynamics have shaped not only on-the-ground developments, such as the emergence of business-inflected notions of the self as a project—which she has documented among middle-class women in Barbados¹⁰—but also scholars’ analysis of such transformations. In Freeman’s view, the florescence of scholarship on affect and affective labor has fallen prey to gendered politics where that which is feminized becomes devalued.¹¹ Freeman lamented that groundbreaking earlier analyses of affective or emotional labor, such as Arlie Hochschild’s 1983 book *The Managed Heart*,¹² have been consigned to the realm of description or case study. She suggested that just as *affect* has become valorized as a theoretical keyword,

so, too, has it become valued as a set of marketable skills: emotional intelligence quotients and “soft skills” are now promoted by corporations and self-help experts as key to being flexible in the volatile landscape of neoliberal global capitalism. With both the ideological and the material valorization of affect’s significance, Freeman saw a masculinization: affect theory and affective labor have become unhinged from the feminized bodies with which they had previously been associated, so that thinking affect in the academic sense and embodying or doing affect in the labor sense become ungendered, denaturalized, acquired skills that are most highly rewarded when practiced by men. Women have not been valued, socially or economically, for their theorizing about affect or their practice of affective labor.

Inspired by Freeman’s characterization of the hierarchical gendering of affect as practical labor in the world and theoretical labor in the academy, this article explores how Vietnam’s emergent biopolitical regime of affective labor has been gendered, classed, and regionalized. I argue that when emotional intelligence as a component of personhood becomes a skill that can be acquired and cultivated, other forms of affective nurture become re-naturalized and re-evaluated as inferior because they are re-essentialized as residing within particular gendered, raced, classed, and geographically located bodies.¹³ While it should not be surprising that the valorization of certain forms of affective labor might rest on the devaluing of other forms and hence other subjects providing it, this claim raises several further questions: How exactly does the dividing line between naturalized essence and developed skill emerge and come to seem commonsensical? How might this fuzzy and fraught boundary nonetheless also provide possibilities for subjects to make claims to knowledge and skill, even as they risk being placed on the essentialized side of the binary? In sum, through what processes does the neoliberal global economy come to be reorganized materially and ideologically around various forms of differentially valued affective labor, and with what consequences?

In this article, I address these issues by focusing on the gendered and classed dimensions of the emerging valorization of affective labor that I observed through interactions between two social work students, Tuyết and Uyên, and their clients in Hồ Chí Minh City. I take inspiration from Johanna Oksala’s call for scholars to provide more finely grained analyses of affective

labor in terms of the kind of work and values involved, particularly with respect to the classic distinction between productive and reproductive labor.¹⁴ As social workers in training, Tuyết and Uyên were learning to perform a kind of affective labor that I call *affective expertise*. I intend for this term to signal two linked affective biopolitical projects. First, social workers are to help their clients become subjects who will display appropriate forms of affect: ways of being, acting, and feeling in the world that individuals experience as diffuse moral, interpersonal, and embodied sensations and which shape perception and behavior. Second, social workers' expertise is delivered affectively: they nurture clients through relationships of trust, respect, and non-judgment based on scientific research on human behavior. In their interactions with clients, the trainee social workers simultaneously embodied interpersonal caring and professional authority, but they also had to work to maintain a line so that their caring was valued as expertise, rather than seen as a "natural" expression of their femininity.

I focus here on students' experiences because the professional socialization process throws into sharp relief the dilemmas of achieving the appropriate affective balance between nurture and knowledge. Themselves in the midst of maturing into adulthood, social work students were neophytes in both the expertise they acquired through their schooling and in the ways of enacting a higher-status position with respect to other adults. Because most of the students were women, I found that they often responded to these affective dilemmas by embodying *tình cảm*, an interpersonal ethic of caring and sentiment that is a key component of normative Vietnamese femininity.¹⁵ Like social work, *tình cảm* requires anticipating and meeting the needs of others in a context of interrelational hierarchy that often demands sacrifice,¹⁶ but with an important difference: *tình cảm* is mutual and reciprocal in a way that social work is not. As both students struggled to achieve the affective expertise required of social workers, Uyên in particular lapsed into the more familiar and socially recognized affective register of *tình cảm*. In so doing, she got a taste of two dilemmas that plague even the most seasoned social work professionals in Vietnam. First, Uyên encountered social workers' own inability to achieve ideals of middle-class, heteronormative femininity, because devoting themselves to affective labor for an urban underclass often impinged on their real or perceived ability to provide

affective labor for their own family members. Second, Uyên confronted the shortcomings of a casework model that turns the structural problem of growing inequality into a matter of individual knowledge, choice, behavior, and—again—affect.

With the affective demands of social workers' labor posing status anxiety in terms of their own gender identities and professional expertise, I observed that social workers generally tended to assert their own class distinction by depicting clients as needy others requiring social workers' educated guidance. Through their daily affective interactions, social workers' frustration with inequality—something that they explicitly ascribed to economic and political structures—would at times morph into impatience with the clients themselves, whom they might describe as lacking knowledge, unresponsive to advice, or resistant to change. Vietnamese social workers' attempts to deploy affective expertise to alleviate suffering caused by the market economy thus contained a bitterly ironic potential to consolidate the lines of class difference by naturalizing inequality as the result of defects inherent within impoverished people themselves—a replication of the very same dynamics that had accompanied the field's emergence in North America and the United Kingdom a century earlier.¹⁷

Vietnamese Social Work in Emergence

Social work in Hồ Chí Minh City has historically been intertwined with the biopolitical practices of three different state regimes. The field of social work emerged in Sài Gòn in the early twentieth century under French colonialism with the intention of professionalizing charitable work and the administration of social programs, particularly for orphans.¹⁸ In the southern Republic of Vietnam (1954–1975), various government and nongovernmental organizations promoted social work training to combat poverty and to manage the displacement caused by war, as refugees from rural fighting arrived in Sài Gòn in increasing numbers. The development of a cohort of professional experts also helped to create an urban middle class whose participation in civil society would shore up the southern regime.¹⁹ In 1975, the victorious government viewed social workers as a conservative force—both because many social workers were Catholic and because the field itself was a bourgeois Band-Aid no longer needed in a socialist society that would erase the

economic inequality that officials viewed as the root cause of individual and family distress. Some social workers were ordered to attend reeducation programs, while others reinvented themselves as teachers or community outreach workers.

Over the past thirty-five years, the development of a market economy under Đổi Mới [Renovation] has been credited with high rates of economic growth measured by GDP and rising household incomes. But a wide range of commentators, including government officials, journalists, academics, and social workers, claim that the market economy has also generated inequality and the related “social problems” [*vấn đề xã hội*] of poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, and child abandonment.²⁰ As the head of a university social work program told me, because social problems in Vietnam stemmed from the nation’s incorporation into global capitalist markets, the countermeasures also had to be global and transnational. In blaming poverty and social problems on the market economy, the professor was engaging in oversimplification. Such conditions existed long before Đổi Mới, and the dynamics shaping recent inequality reflect complex political, regional, ethnic, and gendered factors.²¹ Nevertheless, the rationale articulated by the professor seems to have inspired nearly two decades of government policies that have actively promoted social work as an internationally certified, scientific means to address the woes caused by modernization, urbanization, globalization, and industrialization. In 2004, the state approved social work as a field of university study.²² In 2010, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) announced a target of training sixty thousand cadres in social work by 2020.²³ Universities, as well as local governments and NGOs, received help from USAID, UNICEF, other international organizations, and foreign universities to draft curricula and offer intensive workshops.²⁴ By 2020, more than fifty universities had established undergraduate majors in social work.²⁵

As the field of social work grew during the 2010s, in conversations with me, Vietnamese social workers hastened to assert the importance of their expertise and its consonance with global standards. As trained or aspiring middle-class professionals, social workers, by their own account, applied scientific models of intervention to empower marginalized individuals to understand and solve their own problems. With families, especially mothers,

social workers attempted to inculcate models of “proper” personhood to emphasize the importance of children’s education, job training, hygiene, household budgeting, birth control, and regular health care. Yet when I began this research in 2010, most of the academic and practicing social workers I met had received little formal training in their field.²⁶ Those with master’s degrees had generally earned them in community development, sociology, or psychology. The founding head of one university social work program held a PhD in Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Curricula were the product of bricolage, based on ad hoc workshops and quick translations of English-language texts. Students, enticed by the comparatively lower exam scores required for admission to university social work programs, often began their studies with little knowledge of what the degree would actually entail—beyond a vague, though appreciative, sense of its commitment to helping others.

Exacerbating the confusion during this time was the tendency for Vietnamese newspapers to routinely use the term “social work” [*công tác xã hội*] to refer to broader charitable mobilizations, such as sending youth brigades to distribute food or to help with clean up in the aftermath of seasonal flooding in the deltas. The need to educate the public—about the scientific basis for social work, its therapeutic methods focused on self-determination and empowerment, and hence the field’s distinction from charity—was consistently emphasized in the classes, workshops, and lectures that I attended at various points between 2010 and 2016. That Vietnamese social work needed to emerge rapidly in response to the government’s call only added to the sense of it as very much a work in progress.

As a profession in emergence, social work thus provided a fertile ethnographic opportunity to consider the interaction between transnational expertise, political economy, biopolitical governmentality, individual subjectivity, and class differentiation. Social work’s still-tenuous status also made social workers themselves eager to assert their expertise, yet sometimes uncertain about how best to enact it. As I explore below, much of this anxiety reflects social work’s status as an applied profession in which abstract knowledge must be operationalized through embodied, and often emotionally intense, interpersonal interactions between social worker and client.

Affective Expertise

Social workers in Vietnam are part of a global rise in self-help and mental health experts, particularly in late or post-socialist settings where new market logics demand that individuals exercise rational choice and adaptive flexibility.²⁷ The neoliberal market economy has promoted a notion of the rational, autonomous individual able to self-assess and develop a plan to address shortcomings. Adapting a phrase from Michel Foucault,²⁸ Nicolette Makovicky describes such a person as an “entrepreneur of the self,” possessed of an individualism cultivated through investment in self-improvement.²⁹ Becoming such an individual clearly requires considerable, ongoing work. Before that work can even begin, however, individuals must recognize themselves as particular kinds of potential subjects: they must be subjectivated to develop socially and personally significant identities in a context of power relations that both constrain and enable.³⁰ They have to be trained to develop a perspective on themselves and a “will to improve.”³¹

Like other therapeutic modalities, social work methods and techniques are technologies of the self that subjectivate persons to view themselves as projects requiring ongoing investment in order to be happy, healthy, and productive. Unlike the related fields of psychiatry or psychology, which in Vietnam have tended to be practiced in the form of time-limited interactions in clinical settings such as hospitals or offices and often involve use of psychopharmacological agents,³² the practice of social work is more open-ended and interactive. Social workers meet clients where they are, physically and existentially. They cultivate longer-term interpersonal relationships. Although undergraduate social work programs provide training in psychological and neuroscientific models of behavior, practicing social workers follow a systems approach that views individuals as profoundly shaped by social and cultural context. They include family and community members in their work with clients as needed. By not treating individual distress as primarily the result of internal psychological dynamics, social workers also attend to structural or material causes of suffering—for example, by providing referrals to job training or by securing financial support for childcare or substance abuse treatment.

Social workers’ greater immersion into the lives of their clients also poses an intersubjective dilemma: how can they provide support and care—work

that resembles the affective labor that women typically perform for family and friends—without compromising their own status as experts who must maintain some kind of professional detachment? While scholarship on the psycho-boom in Central and Eastern Europe, China, and elsewhere has detailed the forms of knowledge and power prompting and resulting from the application of professional subjectivation technologies through therapy and self-help,³³ less attention has been paid to the subjectivation of the experts themselves. I address this gap, first, by foregrounding the relationship between the knowledge of personhood promoted by those in the self-help industry and the personhood of the experts themselves and, second, by considering how new forms of affective expertise might depend upon other, lesser-valued forms of gendered and classed affective labor.

For more than two decades, analyses of affect have proliferated in the social sciences and humanities.³⁴ For some scholars, affect is synonymous with emotion, or so nearly so as to make the terms interchangeable.³⁵ Others, such as Brian Massumi, draw a sharp distinction in which affect is precognitive, prelinguistic, embodied potentiality: feeling before aspects of it are codified as emotion by language, cognition, and cultural conventions.³⁶ Massumi's divide between emotion and affect has rightly been critiqued for assuming false binaries between mind and body, individual and society, and the cultural and the biological.³⁷ Even so, many scholars find the term *affect* particularly useful for drawing attention to how diffuse yet powerful feelings can be materially embodied in forms of human self-presentation and interaction, as well as in objects.³⁸

Vietnamese terms to describe feelings lend further nuance to the possible differences between affect and emotion. Allen Tran points out that while Vietnamese language does not make a clear distinction between emotion and affect, there is an important difference between the words *cảm xúc* and *tình cảm*.³⁹ This difference does not, however, neatly map onto a difference between emotion and affect, as Massumi might describe it. Long the more common term, *tình cảm* emphasizes feelings of care, sympathy, and connection that arise and are expressed through interactions with others. *Tình cảm* is touted as an essential feature of Vietnamese culture.⁴⁰ *Cảm xúc*, in contrast, implies a concern with individuals' internal states of feeling and psychodynamics. Tran argues that *cảm xúc* has recently gained popularity

among the middle classes in Hồ Chí Minh City because the neoliberalizing market economy has prompted a reorganization of the self.⁴¹ On the one hand, then, *tình cảm* seems more like affect in Massumi's sense, and *cảm xúc* seems more like emotion. On the other hand, the fact that *tình cảm* is a highly elaborated-upon set of practices that individuals are explicitly socialized to feel, enact, and value suggests that it is misleading to think of affect as somehow internal and biological. While the "affect" of *tình cảm* may be more diffuse and interpersonal than the "emotion" of *cảm xúc*, these embodied feelings arise in particular contexts that also shape the forms of subjectivity through which individuals experience and perceive these sensations. As Emily Martin puts it, "humans' perceptions are social all the way down."⁴² For similar reasons, Sianne Ngai argues that the difference between affect and emotion should be viewed as one of degree along a continuum, rather than one of kind.⁴³

Guided by Vietnamese understandings of the valences of feelings aroused through the interplay between sociality and interiority, as well as by Frances Mascia-Lees's call for feminist anthropologists to be more precise in our analyses of affect, feeling, and emotion,⁴⁴ I focus here on the concept of *tình cảm*—how it is intersubjectively embodied, practiced, experienced, and understood by social workers and those who encounter them—as *affective*. On Ngai's continuum of feelings, *tình cảm* leans more toward experiences of feeling that, although often intense, are also more diffuse and more interpersonal than the more individuated feelings that might be described as *cảm xúc*. At the same time, I refer to *tình cảm* as *affective*, rather than as *affect*, in order to signal the imperfect fit between the English and Vietnamese terms. Scholarship on affect has tended to downplay the cultural elaboration of affective feelings and behaviors, yet it is precisely this dimension of *tình cảm*—that it is "social all the way down"—that makes it a fruitful site for exploring how feelings emerge interactively in political economic formations that explicitly target the self as an object for the application of expertise.

I am therefore less concerned with defining differences between affect and emotion in the abstract and more interested in how lived experience and perceptions of categories of feeling relate to dynamic regimes of value: cultural, ethical, social, political, and economic. A number of scholars of affect share this concern by focusing on its connection to political economy

as a tool of governance in the biopolitical sense of a form of labor to enhance capitalist accumulation. Quoting Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Johanna Oksala defines affective labor as “labor of human contact and interaction, which involves the production and manipulation of affects. Its ‘products’ are relationships and emotional responses: ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion.’”⁴⁵ Affective labor is embodied, but its effects are immaterial.⁴⁶

As noted earlier, Carla Freeman and other feminist scholars have called attention to emotional labor as something that women have traditionally been required to provide in a variety of contexts around the world. During the twentieth century, emotion work was increasingly enlisted in service of capitalism, either as a commodified service to increase corporate profits or as domestic care that allowed family members to contribute to national development projects.⁴⁷ In both these cases, women have been mobilized to use or manage emotions as a form of labor that will foster capital accumulation for their employers or their nations, yet the fact that they are performing “work” as such may go unrecognized because providing supportive care for others is seen as essentially feminine, especially when that work may not be remunerated.⁴⁸ Oksala notes the profound irony of this gendered commodification of affective labor: “On the one hand, as modern, capitalist subjects, we are thus interpellated to recognize our ‘true’ emotions as expressions of our inner and most authentic self. On the other hand, these emotions are detached from us and constructed as interchangeable and measurable things that can be commodified—exchanged in the market and sold as skills.”⁴⁹ For Vietnamese social workers, the fact that interpersonal emotional care in the form of *tình cảm* is a key component of normative femininity meant that the seemingly similar affective support that they were trained to provide for clients risked being seen as an essentially feminine ethic of care in ways that made that labor easier to alienate and its value easier to appropriate.⁵⁰

The perception of social workers’ care as essentially feminine added to public views of the field as less professional, further confounding efforts to define social work as a scientific field of expertise distinct from charity. It also made it hard for social workers themselves to know how to care. Social workers were supposed to navigate the continuum of feelings by controlling their own emotions. They were not supposed to love their clients in a direct,

personal, individual sense. They were, however, supposed to display an evident ethos of care and feeling through words and gestures, so long as this did not congeal into more concrete sentiment centered on a particular client. Social workers were supposed to deploy this therapeutic affect consciously. Indeed, methodological training in one of the social work workshops that I attended in 2015 focused on how to use words and body language to make a client feel listened to and supported in a therapeutically efficacious manner.⁵¹ Of course, stronger feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, or affection could arise in the course of the intimacy of the therapeutic relationship, but the social worker's self-analysis in the context of diaries and case presentations with colleagues would help to separate their own emotions from the care of their clients that they were supposed to embody. Social workers had to learn to be experts in affectively delivering care so that their clients could in turn develop the kind of affective orientation toward the world that would allow them to become responsabilized persons. As I demonstrate below, an unintended consequence of this boundary maintenance was that social workers' gendered affective labor reconstituted class hierarchies.

Learning Affective Expertise

To explore these issues, I conducted six months of in-depth participant observation in 2010–2011 with social work students and faculty at a university in Hồ Chí Minh City. I followed three groups of fourth-year students as they completed required practicum placements with local government welfare organizations or domestic and transnational NGOs.⁵² Tuyết and Uyên were part of a group placed with a transnational NGO that had launched an initiative to prevent HIV among youth using injected drugs, many of whom were also unhoused and engaging in transactional sex.⁵³ Although I participated in students' initial client outreach activities, it was not appropriate for me to be present during one-on-one intervention work. I attended supervisory sessions and case presentations, reviewed students' reports, diaries, and final papers, and conducted life history interviews with students, professors, and supervisors at the NGO.

For an applied field such as social work, the practicum is a crucial step in transforming students possessing only book knowledge into professionals

with practical expertise. It is a challenging journey. Under the supervision of an organization's experienced staff and university instructors, students conducted outreach with a target population to identify a specific client [*thân chủ*]. Students were supposed to work with their client throughout the semester and record their observations, including their own thoughts and feelings, in detailed diaries that they submitted periodically to professors for review and comment. Their final assignment was to prepare a case file [*hồ sơ xã hội*] that outlined a concrete intervention plan designed to help the client solve his or her own problems. The file needed to incorporate a diverse array of data collection techniques, assessment tools, theories of human behavior, and models of individual, social, and environmental interaction—all of which students had studied in their prior coursework. The practicum experiences of Tuyết and Uyên, as poignantly chronicled in their diaries and discussed during group supervision sessions, threw into sharp relief the day-to-day problems that neophyte social workers faced in learning and enacting affective expertise.

T U YẾT

Tuyết struggled throughout the semester to figure out how to help her clients. At first, she viewed the twenty-one-year-old pregnant woman described at the beginning of this article as a victim of circumstance. She wrote in her diary, "In my view, she is truly innocent. Her husband has a chronic medical condition, no job, she is about to become a mother without knowing anything about mothering skills, no one to guide her. All day she just knows to follow her husband from place to place." Echoing popular images of the poor as lacking knowledge and understanding, Tuyết concluded that her client needed instruction to learn how to take care of herself and her child. After being advised by her supervisor that she should not rush in and try to fix things, Tuyết seemed chastened, but she remained eager to figure out why her potential client was the way she was.

Other conversations with young mothers in the park who were unhoused, using injected drugs, and dependent on income from sex work led Tuyết to muse in her diary upon the broader problem of knowledge about child rearing: "Left by mothers to play in the park during the day, at night they sleep outside, no school, nobody to teach them, nobody to care for them.

Many dangers threaten them.” In an ideal world, their mothers would be able to raise them, but many of these children “are just out of the womb and have already become an item of exchange, something that their mothers sell . . . A child disappears, everyone knows about it, ‘but that’s what *bụi đời* [“dust of life,” a term for unhoused street youth⁵⁴] are like.”

Tuyết found a ray of hope in her own interactions with a younger child. The girl stole to survive. When caught, she simply said that she was playing. The child’s grandmother was a fierce old lady whom Tuyết said was reported to threaten people with sticks. The social worker sensed that the child was easily influenced by these circumstances. She was like her mother and grandmother, “but when she’s with me, then it’s like people say, ‘children are like blank sheets of paper.’”⁵⁵ She readily listens to me, maybe because I gave her some food. All of her actions are influenced by the lifestyles of her mother and grandmother.”

As the weeks went by, Tuyết’s developing knowledge of her primary client’s complex family, drug, and financial problems led her to conclude that this case was beyond her abilities. Shortly after the midpoint of the semester, she chose as her primary client a man who had left school in the Mekong Delta after third grade, had been imprisoned for pickpocketing and sex work, and continued to support himself through transactional sex. Although he told Tuyết that he did not wish to change, Tuyết believed she could help him find vocational training and job placement. Tuyết also chose him because he self-reported using drugs only infrequently and thus did not require addiction treatment—something that she rightly felt herself unqualified to provide.

After Tuyết presented this case to the group, the practicum supervisors questioned her choice. One asked, “Does he really want to change his life? Are you clear yet about his psychology?” Tuyết asserted that she was optimistic because he seemed to understand his limitations and had the self-awareness to admit he had made mistakes. The supervisors reluctantly approved her choice of a primary client and pledged to advise Tuyết in guiding him to practice safe sex and find job training.

Less than two weeks later, however, Tuyết reported that her client had disappeared. Having lost two potential clients, she would be unable to develop a clear plan of intervention with anyone during the semester-long

practicum. Later that session, a supervisor obliquely referenced Tuyét's dilemma: "Social workers often face the problem of finding clients. There's water, but no fish. But the fact is, huge challenges require us to try even harder. If you can't choose a case, then you haven't taken advantage of this opportunity."

Tuyét became visibly upset. In a loud, pinched voice, she protested, "In my view, the issue is that I haven't been lucky. I can get sufficient information, but I've been facing challenges in making a case." Soon afterward, she began to cry and left the meeting. Another student reported that she had locked herself in the bathroom. Upon her return twenty minutes later, the group tried to restore her confidence by reminding her that everything is a learning experience. Tuyét again committed to working with the supervisor to identify a new case.

Reflecting on this moment in her diary, Tuyét described her depression over losing her client and being criticized by the supervisor: "I was really shocked at that moment and I did not want to do anything; I did not want to have to explain anything anymore. I need time to find myself again and the direction in which I will head for my future, for my profession....I can't accept a case when my own circumstances mean that I won't be able to meet the client's needs. I can't ingratiate myself with them anymore."

In the final assessment for the semester, Tuyét received praise for her ability to communicate with clients but was told that she needed to learn how to accept help from others. The implication was that if she as a student were unwilling to benefit from the affective expertise of her supervisors, then how could she possibly extend affective expertise to her clients? Her adherence to a vision of a social worker as the possessor of expertise, and hence the one to help, led her to refuse potentially difficult cases. The supervisors were trying to teach her that social workers do not work in isolation. They draw on the assistance of others in a professional network and leverage the client's own strengths.

More subtly, in his remarks following the fish metaphor, the supervisor had reminded the students that they needed to see clients as precious and be grateful for the trust that they bestow. To the extent that a social work relationship might be seen as one-way (social worker helps client), the supervisor was trying to recast it as reciprocal—social worker gives help,

client accepts help, and that act is a gift to the social worker. Tuyết had tried unilaterally and unidirectionally to responsabilize a client, but the successful application of social work expertise had to occur in an interpersonal relationship marked by respect and mutuality.⁵⁶

UYÊN

Whereas Tuyết faltered in the social work practicum because she emphasized authority at the expense of affective connection, Uyên was undermined by her craving for support from others. Uyên wrote in her diary that the youth in the park were defensive. Disappointed to learn that one young man with whom she had conducted an intake interview had in fact lied, Uyên lamented, "Now I don't know what to do to get him to tell me the truth so that I can help him." Uyên was reassured by a supervisor that being lied to is a normal part of working with this population. Uyên nonetheless remained troubled that she seemed more deeply affected by this than the other students. "Why am I always so stupid and naïve, so gullible and honest?" Uyên asked. She began to question herself:

I do not understand myself. I have only recently realized my own defense mechanisms. My own emotional deprivation and emotional longing that has not been answered, the caring that I haven't dared to receive, this has made me turn to take care of others, first my youngest sibling, then my friends. I always make myself appear stable, strong, able to take care of myself, and I am always trying to protect others, so that only when I'm tired do I cry, only then do I feel lonely.

Uyên described this as a vicious cycle and lamented that her apparently desperate clients in fact lived more truthfully than she did.

Uyên's professor and the NGO staff advised her to self-regulate by creating a more stable work schedule and hiding her own feelings when she worked with clients. To me, they expressed concern that Uyên lacked the stable temperament and professional detachment required of social workers. They worried that she identified too closely with her clients.

The situation reached a crisis point when, during a conversation with a client, Uyên began to cry. Her client asked why. He complained that Uyên and the other students were always asking him questions but refused to reveal anything about themselves. Uyên recounted in her diary that she told

him she was crying “because I’m tired, because he touched on issues deep in my heart, issues that I’m always afraid to touch. And the pain rose up. I couldn’t hide my feelings.” She felt stupid and weak for being overcome. This was only reinforced by her client’s response: “He babied me by saying, ‘With your field methods lacking like this, how can you do your work?’ He then claimed the pretext of being busy and left.”

Uyên’s attempt to understand her client had destabilized her sense of self. In confiding in him, she attempted to foster an affective relationship of *tình cảm*. Rather than reciprocate, the client re-imposed the boundary that Uyên had transgressed by questioning her professionalism and walking away. Uyên wondered if people could ever really be true to themselves: “It’s all just about empty appearances, it’s just form. The result is that people are not evaluated on capacity, the results that they can achieve, but they are evaluated based on how well they can wriggle, how well they can make everything seem reasonable. With a whole class of people like that, how can society develop?” If Uyên was to meet her family’s expectations for her own life, then she had to become exactly like what she had critiqued. “Isn’t that strange?” she mused.

Inexperienced in working with clients and longing to forge authentic relationships in terms of both self-expression and interpersonal regard, Uyên looked to her potential client as someone who would reciprocate her care by comforting her. The client’s rejection of this overture—one that he himself elicited—suggested not only that *tình cảm* did not belong in a professional, therapeutic relationship governed by “field methods,” but also that his status as a few years older would place him in a position of “elder brother” [*anh*] and thus bearing disproportionate responsibility to look out for his “younger sister” [*em*].

Although Uyên’s affective and personal crisis was extreme, other students struggled with how encounters with the client-other raised questions about their own personhood and values. The students reported that prior to beginning social work training they had been taught to see much of what their clients did, particularly sex work, stealing, and injected drug use, as social evils. Even if they had now learned to view these behaviors as social problems reflecting broader structural dislocations that in turn rendered families fragile, the neophyte social workers wrestled with the dilemma that only

some individuals—their clients—responded by making bad or immoral choices. This aroused feelings of pity and blame, both of which made it hard to live up to one of the tenets of social work: to accept clients as they are so that one might work to empower them to identify and solve their own problems.⁵⁷

Classing and Gendering Clients and Experts

As I have already noted, *tinh cảm* reflects a cardinal feminine virtue: a ready attention to others' needs, often without anyone even realizing it. During their practicum training, neither Tuyết nor Uyên were able to replace *tinh cảm* with a social worker's expertise. While this could be read as a failure to acquire an affective capability, the fact that they both responded to the experience by questioning their identities—Tuyết's reference to needing to find herself and Uyên's reflections on everything being for show—suggests that the problem lay in letting go of a way of being and feeling in the world that was deeply significant to their personhood not only in gendered terms but also with respect to class.

Student social workers were enjoined to perform tasks that placed them in such close proximity to their class others that their own normative femininity and middle-classness, whether achieved or aspirational, were thrown into question. Consequently, Uyên faced tremendous anxiety about the kind of person that she was being asked to be and about how her parents' upwardly mobile expectations would require her to don an inauthentic social mask. How, she wondered, could she empower clients to be true to themselves if she were not able to do so herself? And what would the future be for a country in which the identity of the ideal middle-class citizen rested on such a charade? Uyên linked personal psychology to the broader problems of rapid social and economic transformation. Tuyết, meanwhile, tried to responsibilize her class others into upward mobility through rational planning.

For the women I met who in fact became social workers, their work posed an even more direct threat to normative classed and gendered expectations. Scholarship on late, post-, or market socialism in Eastern Europe or China documents how the decline of socialism has led to a resurgence of "traditional" gender roles.⁵⁸ With respect to Vietnam, I have argued that this

vision of socialism as merely a veneer temporarily imposed on preexisting gender norms grossly underestimates how socialism in fact fostered new gendered sensibilities.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the vision of market socialism as enabling a return to normal or natural gender roles was one that many of my collocutors found credible. Women's ability to earn a decent income through trade or a profession would allow them to nurture a family by providing modern conveniences and the opportunity to invest in their children's educations. Many urbanites were deeply attracted to state-sponsored visions of modern [*hiện đại*] and civilized [*văn minh*] consumer lifestyles.⁶⁰ Women did much of the work to achieve this ideal. But women were also blamed when this ideal morphed into excess, as when their supposedly uncritical pursuit of consumer pleasure or unrestrained appetite for money and sex led them to neglect husbands and children and resulted in family breakdown.⁶¹

Social workers defined class boundaries by promoting "proper" femininity, masculinity, and family responsibility in the name of helping clients help themselves. That their clients never quite achieved these standards might seem to reinforce the superiority of the middle-class ideal and the social worker's own status as its representative, what Aihwa Ong has dubbed "compassionate domination."⁶² At the same time, the close consideration of social workers' own gendered and classed personhoods provided in this article productively complicates any easy binary between social worker/client and dominator/dominated. Because social workers' acts of policing boundaries involved intimate encounters with class others, theirs was an inherently transgressive profession. This fact became clear to me when one of the professors supervising the practicum began to receive numerous text messages from her husband during the weekly training sessions. She later confided in me that he had accused her of neglecting their young child, who was left in the care of a nanny. Why, he asked her, did she have greater *tình cảm* for low-class drug addicts than for her own flesh and blood? If she had to abandon them for a profession, couldn't it at least be one in which she made more money? When her husband's accusations escalated into verbal and physical abuse, the professor had a breakdown and ultimately left him. Becoming a single mother and moving in with her parents, she sacrificed middle-class domesticity and its associated heteronormative nuclear family

in order to continue working in her chosen profession. Other social workers remained single long past the age at which women were expected to marry because no husband, they claimed, would endure the sacrifices that the profession exacted: long hours, separation, and exhaustion.

Scholarship on contemporary Asian middle-classness often describes it as an uneven and anxious work in progress⁶³—a situation only exacerbated in market socialist contexts where desire for wealth jostles against lingering suspicion of it.⁶⁴ Women social workers exposed the rough edges of middle-class ideals in the making because their jobs often led them to blur the boundaries of the very propriety that those ideals required them to maintain. I learned several years after my initial fieldwork that another student in the group had violated the field's ethics by marrying a client whom she had met during her first practicum. Uyên's longing for connection, Tuyết's refusal to accept help, the professor's abusive husband and failed marriage, and the taboo union between social work student and client all pointed to the difficulties of becoming an affective expert. As they performed the work of "wriggling" to make middle-classness and its proprietary gender norms seem reasonable to themselves, their clients, and the broader public, women social workers often failed to embody these norms.

Conclusion: The Limits of Affective Expertise

The personal and interpersonal dilemmas chronicled in this article point to a larger limitation of social work as practiced in contemporary Vietnam. Social workers apply their affective expertise in ongoing interactions with clients, in an environment in which both experts and the broader public remain unsure about the profession's overall mission. One social work professor who received training abroad emphasized in a conversation with me that social workers elsewhere had an advocacy role that shaped public policy. Their labor in this regard was therefore not exclusively affective. Without this crucial voice, social workers in Vietnam faced a quandary. Their field was expanding in the 2010s due to recognition that structural forces related to a market economy created inequality and dislocation that led to personal and family distress. Yet the casework model meant that social workers could only help on the level of the individual or family. They applied their affective expertise downward toward clients in service of state biopolitical agendas,

but they did not have the capacity to share their expertise upward to shape the articulation and implementation of biopolitics or to advocate for the populations they served.

If social workers in Vietnam had a forum through which they could shape social welfare debates, they could draw public attention to the structural factors that promote class stratification and create the underclass as such. They could call for measures to address those underlying causes, while also continuing to provide direct assistance to individuals in distress. Such an advocacy role would also help alleviate the complicity of affective expertise in class othering through the individuation of structural inequality. Social work knowledge promotes nonjudgmental acceptance and empowerment of the client, yet as the episodes explored in this article so vividly show, Vietnamese social workers themselves have to act within a hierarchical classed and gendered landscape in which identity is relational and hence persons become legible by being positioned in the social order. As social workers sought to establish their authority, the lack of an advocacy role that would validate their expertise meant that they often wound up asserting their social and cultural capital through their affective interactions with clients. These dilemmas traveled home with them, as the time and energy demanded by their profession, as well as its low pay, thwarted their ability in their own lives to realize the middle-class ideals of gender and family that they promoted among their clients. Despite dedicating their lives to ameliorating class and gender inequality caused by a market economy, social workers' own position as emergent middle-class experts tasked with diagnosing and addressing the problems of a growing urban underclass may in fact have contributed to naturalizing class inequality. They had no choice but to treat structural problems as a biopolitical project of subjectivating idealized gendered and classed personhoods—personhoods that neither they nor their clients could achieve.

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2014), for which she was awarded the 2016 Harry J. Benda Prize from the Association for Asian Studies, and co-editor with Kirsten W. Endres of *Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestations in the Vietnamese Marketplace* (Cornell University Press, 2018). Versions of this article were presented at ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute; University of California, Riverside; Bennington College; and annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. The author is grateful for comments provided by members of the audiences on those occasions, as well as by Kimberly Arkin, Misty Bastian, David Biggs, Johanna Davidson, Claire Edington, Ellen Foley, Carla Freeman, Ella Ben Hagai, Carla Jones, Martha Louise Lincoln, Minh T. N. Nguyen, Christina Schwenkel, Merav Shohet, Allen Tran, Tiantian Zheng, and two peer reviewers. Research was funded by grants from College of the Holy Cross.

ABSTRACT

Alongside economic change, market socialism in Vietnam entails biopolitical campaigns to combat poverty as a “social problem.” Social workers in Hồ Chí Minh City function as agents of therapeutic governance to transform the lives of poor urban clients by employing empathetic interpersonal interaction grounded in scientific models of human behavior. Analysis of social workers’ affective expertise illuminates two gendered and classed consequences of their technoscientific interventions. First, social work is feminized, yet social workers often cannot achieve middle-class feminine ideals. Second, the casework approach risks naturalizing class inequality by atomizing structural problems as stemming from individual characteristics that require reform.

KEYWORDS: *Biopolitics, social work, gender, class, affect, expertise*

Notes

1. All translations from Vietnamese are by the author, unless otherwise noted.
2. Minh T. N. Nguyen, “Vietnam’s ‘Socialization’ Policy and the Moral Subject in a Privatizing Economy,” *Economy and Society* 47, no. 4 (2018): 627–647.
3. For detailed discussion of the complex interplay in Vietnam between neoliberal logics and political and economic formations, on the one hand, and socialism,

- cultural values, and social structures, on the other, see Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkovich, "Guest Editors' Introduction: How Is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How Is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism?" *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, no. 2 (2012): 379–401.
4. M. Nguyen, "Vietnam's 'Socialization' Policy," 632–633.
 5. Alfred Montoya analyzes how HIV/AIDS interventions employ this logic to inculcate citizens with an ethic of individual responsibility for health outcomes in "From 'the People' to 'the Human': HIV/AIDS, Neoliberalism, and the Economy of Virtue in Contemporary Vietnam," *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, no. 2 (2012): 561–591.
 6. See Ann Marie Leshkovich, *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 79–84; Nguyễn-võ Thu-huong, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Ashley Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Jayne Werner, "Gender, Household, and State: Renovation (Đổi Mới) as Social Process in Việt Nam," in *Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Việt Nam*, ed. Jayne Werner and Danièle Bélanger (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2002), 29–48; Jayne Werner, *Gender, Household, and State in Post-revolutionary Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2009); Jayne Werner and Danièle Bélanger, eds., *Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Việt Nam* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2002).
 7. Minh T. N. Nguyen, *Vietnam's Socialist Servants: Domesticity, Class, Gender, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2015), 90–91.
 8. Lisa Drummond, "The Modern 'Vietnamese Woman': Socialization and Women's Magazines," in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrøm (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 158–178; Ann Marie Leshkovich, "Standardized Forms of Vietnamese Selfhood: An Ethnographic Genealogy of Documentation," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 1 (2014): 143–162.
 9. The term "social evils" creates a logic of blame that can make it unclear whether "evil" lies in the circumstances or in the character of those victimized by them. For this reason, social workers tend to prefer the more neutral phrase, "social problems" [*vấn đề xã hội*]. "Social evils" remains widely used, however, in both official and popular discourse.
 10. Carla Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
 11. Carla Freeman, remarks during "State of the Field: A Live Annual Review," Association for Feminist Anthropology, annual meeting of the American

- Anthropological Association, December 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPjeSZVURrw> (accessed August 31, 2021).
12. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
 13. Feminist scholars, often those working within a Marxist tradition and inspired by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's analysis of affective labor, point out, for example, that care work—much of it formerly domestic—has been outsourced in our contemporary global economy to poor or immigrant women of color from or in the Global South. According to Johanna Oksala, Hardt and Negri highlight how in the contemporary service economy, “labor and society have to become intelligent, communicative, and affective.” Johanna Oksala, “Affective Labor and Feminist Politics,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (2016): 284n6; citing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004).
 14. Oksala, “Affective Labor and Feminist Politics.”
 15. Helle Rydstrom, *Embodying Morality: Growing up in Rural Northern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003); Leshkovich, *Essential Trade*.
 16. Merav Shohet, *Silence and Sacrifice: Family Stories of Care and the Limits of Love in Vietnam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).
 17. Daniel J. Walkowitz argues that from social work's early-twentieth-century origins to its present-day practice in the United States, “The heart of social workers' jobs as gatekeepers of public and private relief aid has always been patrolling the boundaries of class. The sine qua non of social work involves ‘casing’ the borderline between independency and dependency, between self-sufficient workers like themselves and those they deem ‘less fortunate.’” Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 10.
 18. Van Nguyen-Marshall, “The Associational Life of the Vietnamese Middle Class in Saigon (1950s–1970s),” in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, ed. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Danièle Bélanger (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 71.
 19. Nguyen-Marshall, “Associational Life,” 72. According to Nguyen-Marshall, the actual political orientation of social workers was more complex: some supported the modernizing anti-communism of the southern government, while others became revolutionaries. Many of the practicing and academic social workers with whom I conducted life history interviews in Hồ Chí Minh City during the early 2010s were Catholic. While Catholics were deemed reliably anti-communist, the southern regime remained skeptical of Buddhist social workers. Government entities kept Buddhist-run social programs and orphanages under close surveillance, understanding them to be possible sources of communist

- infiltration. See, for example, “Công văn số 2551-BNV/HC/29/M về vấn đề đặt kế hoạch kiểm soát Làng Cô Nhi Long Thành, Biên Hoà,” September 15, 1970, Phủ Thủ Tướng, file no. 30543, Vietnam National Archives II, Hồ Chí Minh City.
20. See, for example, Philip Taylor, “Introduction: Social Inequality in a Socialist State,” in *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), 1–40; Võ Thuần, ed., *Nhập môn công tác xã hội* [Introduction to Social Work] (Đà Lạt: Department of Social Work and Community Development, University of Đà Lạt, 2005), 37–38.
 21. Taylor, “Introduction.”
 22. Bộ Giáo Dục và Đào Tạo, “Quyết Định 35/2004/QĐ-BGDĐT ngày 11 tháng 10 năm 2004 của Bộ Trưởng Bộ Giáo Dục và Đào Tạo về Việc: Ban Hành Chương Trình Khung Giáo Dục Đại Học Ngành Công Tác Xã Hội Trình Độ Đại Học, Cao Đẳng,” 2004.
 23. Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, “Quyết Định 32/2010/QĐ-TTg ngày 25 tháng 3 năm 2010 Phê Duyệt Đề Án Phát Triển Nghề Công Tác Xã Hội Giai Đoạn 2010–2020,” 2010.
 24. Hoa Thi Nguyen et al., “Social Work Field Education in Vietnam: Challenges and Recommendations for a Better Model,” *International Social Work* 65, no. 6 (2022): 1218.
 25. H. Nguyen et al., “Social Work Field Education,” 1227.
 26. H. Nguyen et al., “Social Work Field Education 1218.
 27. Arthur Kleinman et al., *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person: What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Nicolette Makovicky, “Introduction: Me, Inc.? Untangling Neoliberalism, Personhood, and Postsocialism,” in *Neoliberalism, Personhood, and Postsocialism: Enterprising Selves in Changing Economies*, ed. Nicolette Makovicky (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), 1; Tomas Matza, *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 3–4; Nguyễn-võ, *Ironies of Freedom*, 79; Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3; Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 149; Allen L. Tran, “Rich Sentiments and the Cultural Politics of Emotion in Postreform Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam,” *American Anthropologist* 117, no. 3 (2015): 480–492; Jie Yang, *Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance in China* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, Cornell University Press, 2015); Li Zhang, “Bentuhua: Culturing Psychotherapy in Postsocialist China,” *Culture Medicine Psychiatry* 38 (2014): 283–305; Li Zhang, *Anxious*

- China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).
28. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
 29. Makovicky, “Introduction: Me, Inc.?” 11; see also Kleinman et al., *Deep China*. Carla Freeman chronicles a similar rise of entrepreneurial selfhood in Barbados as a “generalized way of being and way of feeling in the world” that requires therapeutic culture but also draws on local notions of reputation; Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves*, 1.
 30. The idea of subjectivation stems from Judith Butler’s reading of Foucault’s concept of subjection as “not only a subordination but a securing and maintaining, a putting into place of a subject, a subjectivation”; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7. See also Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 381–395; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
 31. Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
 32. Allen L. Tran, Trần Đan Tâm, Hà Thúc Dũng, and Nguyễn Cúc Trâm, “Drug Adherence, Medical Pluralism, and Psychopharmaceutical Selfhood in Postreform Vietnam,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 57, no. 1 (2020): 81–93.
 33. See, for example, Kleinman et al., *Deep China*; Makovicky, “Introduction: Me, Inc.?”; Matza, *Shock Therapy*; Yang, *Unknotting the Heart*; Zhang, “Bentuhua”; Zhang, *Anxious China*.
 34. For an insightful review of the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences, see Jie Yang, “The Politics of Affect and Emotion: Imagination, Potentiality and Anticipation in East Asia,” in *The Political Economy of Affect and Emotion in East Asia*, ed. Jie Yang (London: Routledge, 2014), 3–28.
 35. Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–139; Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston, “Introduction: Toward an Anthropology of Affect and Evocative Ethnography,” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 26, no. 2 (2015): 109–120.
 36. Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 83–109.
 37. Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434–472; Emily Martin, “The Potentiality of Ethnography and the Limits of Affect Theory,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. S7 (2013): S149–S158; William

- Mazzarella, "Affect: What Is It Good For?" in *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, ed. Saurabh Dube (London: Routledge, 2009), 291–309; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Tran, "Rich Sentiments"; Daniel White, "Tears, Capital, Ethics: Television and the Public Sphere in Japan," in *The Political Economy of Affect and Emotion in East Asia*, ed. Jie Yang (London: Routledge, 2014), 100–115; Yang, "The Politics of Affect and Emotion"; Yang, *Unknotting the Heart*.
38. Athena Athanasiou, Pothiti Hantzaroula, and Kostas Yannakopoulos, "Towards a New Epistemology: The 'Affective Turn,'" *Historein* 8 (2008): 5–16; Yael Navaro-Yashin, "Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 1–18; Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnycky, "Economies of Affect," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 57–77; Daromir Rudnycky, "Circulating Tears and Managing Hearts: Governing through Affect in an Indonesian Steel Factory," *Anthropological Theory* 11, no. 1 (2011): 63–87; Christina Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 252–277.
 39. Tran, "Rich Sentiments," 482.
 40. Tran, "Rich Sentiments," 481, 484.
 41. Tran, "Rich Sentiments," 481.
 42. Martin, "The Potentiality of Ethnography," S157.
 43. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 27.
 44. Frances Mascia-Lees, "The Body and Embodiment in the History of Feminist Anthropology: An Idiosyncratic Excursion through Binaries," in *Mapping Feminist Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ellen Lewin and Leni M. Silverstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 146–167.
 45. Oksala, "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics," 284; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 96.
 46. Oksala, "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics," 284.
 47. For emotion work as a commodified service to increase corporate profits, see Hochschild, *Managed Heart*. For emotion work as a contribution to national development projects, see Carla Jones, "Whose Stress? Emotion Work in Middle-Class Javanese Homes," *Ethnos* 69, no. 4 (2004): 509–528.
 48. See also Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves*; Ayaka Yoshimizu, "Affective Foreigners Save Our Elder Citizens': Gender, Affective Labor and Biopolitics in Japan," in *The Political Economy of Affect and Emotion in East Asia*, ed. Jie Yang (London: Routledge, 2014), 137–153.
 49. Oksala, "Affective Labor and Feminist Politics," 295.
 50. Rydstrom, *Embodying Morality*; Leshkovich, *Essential Trade*.

51. E. Summerson Carr and Yvonne Smith describe similar “practice poetics” in US social workers’ motivational interviewing; E. Summerson Carr and Yvonne Smith, “The Poetics of Therapeutic Practice: Motivational Interviewing and the Powers of Pause,” *Culture Medicine Psychiatry* 38 (2014): 83–114.
52. Research activities also included auditing introductory social work classes. In the summers of 2014, 2015, and 2016, I conducted follow-up research with students, professors, and supervisors and attended intensive workshops for practicing, academic, and student social workers. I also conducted archival research on the history of social work in southern Vietnam and reviewed media discussions and policy documents related to the professionalization and expansion of the field.
53. Alfred Montoya tracks the role of US funding in the expansion of HIV/AIDS prevention programs in Vietnam during the first decade of the 2000s; Montoya, “From ‘the People’ to ‘the Human.’”
54. Although *bụi đời* is generally a derogatory term, in the context that Tuyết quotes, it was being used self-ascriptively by her potential clients to convey a sense of resignation because their living conditions compromised their capacity for ethical action.
55. Helle Rydstrom argues that while Vietnamese might describe all children as “blank sheets of paper,” they generally perceive masculinity as more strongly biologically imprinted. Girls, therefore, are blanker than boys and hence more malleable; Helle Rydstrom, “‘Like a White Piece of Paper’: Embodiment and the Moral Upbringing of Vietnamese Children,” *Ethnos* 66, no. 3 (2001): 394–413.
56. Li Zhang notes that the principle of non-direction in therapeutic relationships also poses difficulties in China because clients expect authorities to be directive and question authorities’ expertise when they are not; Zhang, “Bentuhua,” 300.
57. As Alexandra Bakalaki found in her field work in the first decade of the 2000s with a Greek food redistribution program, volunteers similarly struggled to manage reactions of pity and blame, despite warnings that such feelings would interfere with their ability to provide psychological support; Alexandra Bakalaki, “On the Ambiguities of Altruism and the Domestication of Emotions,” *Historein* 8 (2008): 87.
58. Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Kristen Ghodsee, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism, and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Nicolette Makovicky, “The Object of Morality: Rethinking Informal Networks in Central Europe,” in *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation*, ed. Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 103–124; Michele Rivkin-Fish,

- Women's Health in Post-Soviet Russia: The Politics of Intervention* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Jacqui True, *Gender, Globalization, and Post-socialism: The Czech Republic after Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 28–30; Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 64; Elaine Weiner, *Market Dreams: Gender, Class, and Capitalism in the Czech Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).
59. Ann Marie Leshkowich, "Making Class and Gender: (Market) Socialist Enframing of Traders in Ho Chi Minh City," *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 2 (2011): 277–290; Leshkowich, *Essential Trade*.
 60. Erik Harms has found that even those displaced from their homes in the name of urban redevelopment still support the discourse of modern, rational order as "beautiful"; Erik Harms, "Beauty as Control in the New Saigon: Eviction, New Urban Zones, and Atomized Dissent in a Southeast Asian City," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 4 (2012): 735–750.
 61. For discussion of these gendered and classed logics of blame, see Ann Marie Leshkowich, "Finances, Family, Fashion, Fitness, and...Freedom? The Changing Lives of Urban Middle-Class Vietnamese Women," in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, ed. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond, and Danièle Bélanger (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 95–113.
 62. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); see also Bakalaki, "On the Ambiguities of Altruism"; Bonnie McElhinny, "The Audacity of Affect: Gender, Race, and History in Linguistic Accounts of Legitimacy and Belonging," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 320; Yang, *Unknotting the Heart*.
 63. See, for example, Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
 64. Carolyn L. Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism: How Ordinary People are Shaping Class and Status in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Leshkowich, *Essential Trade*; Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).