Rape experiences and the limits of women’s agency in contemporary post-reform Vietnam
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CHAPTER 2

Two sides of the same subjective coin:
Contextualization of Victimhood and Agency among Female Rapees

1. Victimhood or agency
This chapter provides a necessary theoretical background to the development of my research concepts and to the empirical findings pertaining to the description and analysis of the coping behaviour of raped women that will be presented throughout the thesis. The question is how to develop a theoretical approach regarding relational autonomy of female rapees in a patriarchal society like Vietnam? At the outset, it is important to clear up the problem of terminology.

1.1. Concept explication
In everyday language, the term “victim” is often used to depict girls and women who have been raped or sexually abused. The equivalent of “victim” in Vietnamese is nạn nhân, which means “the person who suffers from an incident, a social catastrophe or an unjust regime” (Từ điển tiếng Việt [Vn.: Dictionary of Vietnamese] 1997:635). In English, the terms victim and survivor are often used to refer to someone who has been sexually assaulted. Victim is used specifically to refer to the person directly after the assault, and survivor is used to refer to someone who has not only “survived” the assault but is also actively engaged in the healing process (Earle, 1995; Mardorossian, 2002). In this sense, survivors focus on the positive ways they are changing their lives and draw on images of strength and success when declaring themselves as survivors (Mills, 1985). More significantly still, Amanda Konradi argues that “survivor implies agency” (1996:60). My objective is to go beyond seeing girls and women who have been raped as either “victims” or “survivors” and to look at these individuals’ capabilities to cope with their traumatic experiences for survival. This is done by taking an ethnographic “view from below” with emphasis on the women’s own accounts of their experiences. In
particular, I pay close attention to the language in which these women express themselves in their everyday activities because the word “rape” may not even be known to themselves (Muehlenhard et al. 1996) or may be found difficult to define (Best, 1997; Hengehold, 2000) by some of them.

In presenting my analyses and explications in this study, I try to use a clear and precise language as much as I can, drawing on prevailing concepts and terminology in social sciences and humanities. In particular, as suggested by Oscar Salemink, I opt to use the term “rapee(s)”\(^5\) to depict women and girls who have been raped because this is exactly what “defines” them: they have been raped (by rapists). There is no question as to their status. Conveniently with the term “rapee” I can make reference to various aspects related to the person’s rape experience without falling into the pitfall of seeing only the conditions of being victimized. However I shall mention “victim” when quoting or making reference to media reports and/or legal discourses in keeping up with the ways rape is portrayed by these social institutions.

1.2. Conceptual justification

Before delving into a number of conceptions related to the theoretical framework of this project, it is necessary to review the main scholarly discussions of rape.

Most of the earlier research on rape victimhood has dwelt on its psychological aspects (Burgess and Holstrom, 1974; Ruch et al. 1980, 1983; Emm and McKenry, 1988; Resick and Schnicke, 1996; Resnick et al. 1999; Jenkins et al. 2000; Nisith et al. 2000) and thus generally overlooked the social-cultural context in which victims react to their traumatic experiences (for criticism see Fine, 1983; Burt and Kartz, 1987; Luo, 2000). Moreover the clinical approach with its primary focus on the traumatic psychological effects of rape may be limiting because it ultimately leads to the social construction of rapees as powerless individuals.\(^6\) Admittedly its intention was to redress inequalities regarding women’s political and social rights, however this “cult of victimhood” (Convery, 2006: 2) was criticized for its deliberate political strategy to obtain special treatment and “institutional advantage through cynical manipulation of public sympathy” (ibid). In the


\(^6\) Lamb contends that “victims are drowned in the sea of degrees of powerlessness” (1999:43).
meantime a number of feminist scholars have problematized the construction of victimhood by pointing to the ways in which such a categorization places women at opposite poles of an agency continuum (Mahoney, 1994; Konradi, 1996, 1999, 2000; Best, 1997; Madriz, 1997; Dunn, 2005). According to this reasoning, an exclusive focus on women’s victimhood is incomplete and limiting because it ignores women’s active efforts to mobilize their resources to survive. Ironically, a strong focus of women’s agency tends to blur the impact of oppression (Lamb, 2006), and may render invisible the larger social context of victimization. In that sense, concepts of women’s victimhood and agency are both overly simplistic because they fail to take account of contradictions, structural ambiguities, and the personal ambivalences of women’s experience, especially those who have suffered sexual assault.

To avoid these extreme standpoints, as Elizabeth Schneider (1993) argues, it is necessary to understand both the social context of women’s oppression, which shapes women’s choices and constrains women’s resistance and agency, in a more nuanced way, rather than seeing only blacks and whites. In this study, I wish to explore that “grey” area in contemporary feminist scholarship by providing an ethnographic account of the lived experiences of rapees, tracing their complex struggles over meaning, identity and value in coping with rape trauma as active agents. This is particularly relevant in the recent scholarship on the concept of relational autonomy (i.e. Sherwin, 1998; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000; Pollack, 2000; James and Foster 2003; Sperry, 2005), which is oriented toward the issue of human agency by placing emphasis on people’s own actions and deliberations (cf. Gammeltoft, 2007).

This notion of relational autonomy is helpful in understanding the space between women’s victimization and oppression and their responses to these conditions. Besides trying to resolve the problem of victim/agent dichotomy, autonomy in this context seems to be a valuable conceptual alternative of understanding sex-based oppression, subjection, and agency. Given the fact that there is a wide range of areas in which the terms “agent,” “agency” and “autonomy” are applied, I will limit myself to discussing the common grounds between these two notions, for example the acknowledgement of the individual’s capabilities of weighing personal options and making choices under certain circumstances. For instance, drawing on Michel Foucault’s view of the subject (Foucault,
1988), Mark Bevir (1999) points out the distinction between autonomy and agency. He argues that “autonomous subject(s) would be able, at least in principle, to have experiences, to reason, to adopt beliefs, and to act, outside all the social contexts” (1999:67). Agents “are creative beings,” and “exist only in specific social contexts, but these contexts never determine how they try to construct themselves” (ibid.). Bevir and his colleague then try to facilitate the understanding of agency as situated (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). Under such a definition, the subject could be viewed as an agent, even if not an autonomous agent. Far from requiring a complete independence from others, a person’s autonomy can be defined as intrinsically and causally relational because of the social constitution of the agent itself and the social relationships, which can impede or enhance autonomy.

In addition I also draw on anthropological accounts of agency as illustrated by the recent works of Sherry Ortner (2006) and Michael Jackson (2005). According to these authors, agency should be considered as less a matter of free will than of working within the limits placed by such factors as birth, role and duty, and agency of intention. More specifically, Ortner makes a distinction between agency as a form of power (including the empowerment of the subject, the domination of others, the resistance to domination and so forth) and agency as a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects; in fact, there exists always a possibility of exercising agency. Defined in this way, every culture, every subculture constructs its own forms of agency. This understanding of agency bears a resemblance to Michael Jackson’s notion of human existence as a struggle between circumstances over which people have little control and their capacity to live those circumstances in a variety of ways.

2. A relational approach to an individual’s autonomy

Much has been written about conceptions of autonomy, which form the core of the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy. At the most simple level, to be autonomous is to be self-oriented, self-sufficient, and self-guided (Reath, 2006). Nevertheless this mainstream liberal conception of autonomy has been severely criticized by feminists as
overly individualistic, ignoring the importance of social relationships. It was in this context that the concept of relational autonomy has come to be known.\(^7\)

Historically this concept was first articulated from a feminist perspective by Jennifer Nedelsky (1989) (quoted in Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 26). It is worth noting that the term “feminist” in this context can be seen as an expression of (unequal) gender relations with the aim of improving the situation of women. The focus of relational approaches is “to analyze the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency” (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 4).

Conceptually, there are two related aspects in relational approaches (Mackenzie, 2007). In the first instance, it is to articulate an understanding of autonomy grounded in the recognition of the fact that an agent’s identities and self-conceptions are embedded in, and shaped by, the complex interpersonal, social, cultural and historical contexts within which they live their lives. Second, it is to analyze the ways in which oppressive social relationships, institutions and practices can impair autonomy not only through overt repression and coercive mechanisms but by limiting and hampering the development of autonomy competences.

The recent work of Diana Meyers (2000, 2002 and 2004) has been particularly influential in analyzing the ways in which oppressive social environments can impair agents’ autonomy. For example, what the society at large (i.e. family, community, police, etc.) consider as effective to protect women from the dangers of rape may in fact curtail the women’s agency in post-rape management. Of these social conditions the influence of kinship must be taken into account, especially in a country like Vietnam where traditional approaches to dealing with rape may greatly impair the agency of the woman involved. For example, the rape of a girl has social and moral consequences for the entire family, especially for the parents and siblings, and even to the extended kin. This could explain why the rape of an individual girl (unless she keeps silent about it) is frequently brought up for discussion as family affairs or family interests (e.g., in terms of marriageability). In

this line of thinking, the case studies in my research reflect the feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon’s early and oft-cited assertion that male-dominated societies have tolerated, condoned, and even encouraged gender-based violence and abuse (see, e.g., MacKinnon, 1997, 2006). In her opinion, “rape is (emphasis original) a daily act by men against women: it is always an act of domination by men over women” (1994:10). This argument is further reflected in her scepticism - at the level of strategy - about the option of change, believing women’s subordination to be virtually transhistorical: “Our status as a group relative to men has almost never, if ever, been much changed from what it is.” (1987:167, see Valverde, 1989 for critical comments on the theory of MacKinnon).

Admittedly, MacKinnon’s work has been important for me in exposing the difficulty of a female plaintiff’s journey in search of justice. The problem, however, is that such a view on women’s overall subordination in the patriarchal society would not be accommodating to the focal point of the present study, that is acknowledging aspects of individuals’ self-conceptions that more accurately reflect their capacities for relational autonomy.

To resolve this theoretical dilemma it is necessary to look at autonomy as a matter of degree in a particular social, cultural and political context. In this connection I go back to the mainstream philosophical view of autonomy as a variety of free will (see Kim, 2006 for a full review). Underpinning this conception of autonomy is a certain perfectionist idea about human good (Westlund, 2009). However there are some theoretical aspects that place limitations on this classic Western view of autonomy. The first is that it examines the plight of non-Western women in both non-Western and Western countries by applying Western models. Ultimately, such an approach gives rise to the idea that non-Western women may be depicted as politically immature persons who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism, as observed critically by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (2005). Secondly, this Western view of autonomy fails to accommodate the fact that women, and men, from both Western and non-Western cultures face cultural constraints on their autonomy (Chambers, 2004). As Clare Chambers has argued, “if feminists are to prefer (aspects of) Western liberal cultures over (aspects of) traditional or religious cultures, it must be because liberal cultures embody norms that are more compatible with gender equality, not because liberal cultures contain no norms and thus do not limit women’s autonomy” (2004:332).
In this light, the renewed concept of relational autonomy designates a loosely related collection of views that share an emphasis on the social embeddedness of the self and on the social structures and relations that renders autonomy possible cross-culturally despite the “westerner” origins of the concept (Westlund, 2009). Thus, to deny that individuals/women - particularly those in the so-called traditional societies - can ever autonomously engage in self-conceptions is both theoretically problematic and inappropriately patronizing toward at least some individuals who endorse such lives for themselves.

Briefly, an alternative analysis based on relational autonomy that theorizes the impact of oppression on women’s choices, identities, and actions may help reveal the other (positive) side of women’s survival strategy. Within this paradigm, there may be room for analyzing the impact of oppression and how women exercise their “agentic” skills within patriarchal cultures.

3. Towards a relational-autonomy approach to the study of rape

How is the notion of relational autonomy embedded in the debate on rape, violence and suffering in contemporary scholarly literature? It is apparent that this overall approach to autonomy has increasingly gained currency, and several researchers have lately developed variations of it (for example, Cahill, 2000; Brison, 2002; Burns, 2005; Freedman, 2006). By and large, the development of a relational approach can be operationalized at two interrelated levels. The first level concerns the recognition of the fact that individuals are able to act as agents even when the conditions are oppressive. The second level concerns the agent’s ability to act out autonomous desires or to make autonomous choices. Now I briefly discuss these two main aspects of relational autonomy.

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8 This neologism was first used in psychological dimensions in identifying agency with male principles or masculinity and communion with female principles or femininity (Bakan, 1966; Spence & Helmreich, 1978; cf. Deci & Ryan, 2002).
9 This is to say, however, that there are certain ambiguities in relational conceptions of autonomy. For related discussions, see Christman (2003).
10 Agency under what Sanchez calls “conditions of excessive constraint” is always contingent and situated (1999:41).
11 Some authors reconstruct passivity as an active strategy of survival, and therefore can serve as a kind of agency (e.g., Lempert, 1996).
3.1. Individuals as agents under oppressive conditions: Rape and the feminine body

Here I look at the feminine body as a starting point for discussion, because theorizing on the female body, initially as a site of power and dominance as well as a site of autonomy and subjectivity, is tantamount to a major moral and political battlefield (Fuss, 1989, quoted in Zarkov, 2007:9, cf. Ballantyne and Burton, 2005; Gouda, 2008). The female body, in both metaphoric and material senses, is produced through multiple relationships defined by class, race, sexuality, and ethnicity in a particular socio-political setting. Then how is this body to be treated in the context of rape studies?

An important contribution to this debate is the work of Ann Cahill (2000). Inspired by the contemporary feminist theory on the body (i.e. Young, 1990; Butler, 1993; Braidotti, 1994; Irigaray, 1996) Cahill argues that in patriarchal cultures the feminine body is constructed as “the guilty pre-victim” (2000: 56, original emphasis) and if the body is hurt or violated, then “the blame must rest on the woman’s failure to sufficiently limit its movements” (2000:52-53). Therefore, until a woman can establish her innocence or provide evidence of prudence, she is held responsible for acts of aggressive masculine sexuality; all this leads to the production of a “culpable female sexuality” (2000: 56; see also Madriz, 1997; Cahill, 2007).

Like Iris Young (1990) and Sharon Marcus (1992), Cahill concedes that the restriction on women’s movements and space to protect the vulnerable feminine body is in fact a defense against “spatial and bodily invasion,” to use Young’s words (1990:155), such as the threat of rape. This threat of sexual violence plays a special role in the social construction of the feminine body because rape is seen as “a fate worse than, or tantamount to, death” (Marcus, 1992: 387). In Cahill’s view, rape - a particular bodily attack - “constitutes a fundamental and sexual specific undermining of a female person’s subjective integrity” (2000:115). Cahill argues further that rape is an embodied experience because this specificity of the act of sexual abuse can produce a variety of experiences. The point is that rape experiences are interpreted in particular ways and that social conditions - such as construction of the female body - are a filter to arrive at particular interpretations. So there may be agency but depending on the conditions it may
not be the kind of agency that is considered to be good - by the wider society - for the woman herself.

This approach helps elucidate the effect of social conditions upon women’s identities, experiences, and choices in post-rape management. Moreover such a conceptualization shifts the focus from the individual to the social conditions and definitions of family integrity that produce victimizing experiences, and thereby provides space for the possibility of women’s agency (Pollack, 2000). Following this way of thinking, I find Cahill’s argument in line with contemporary anthropology’s treatment of the body, embodiment and subjectivity, with its emphasis on the body as an active agent in its interplay with a world already inhabited by other agents (Csordas, 1994). It animates the work of Arjun Appadurai (1998), who has depicted bodily violence as a process of inscribing bodies with “social meaning(s)” that transcend mere physical and/or biological realities (Winkler, 1994). Moreover, it harks back to the work of Mary Douglas (1991) on the way the individual body intersects with notions of a collective body in terms of a modality of cleanliness or purity, as well as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993)’s conceptualization of the body politic as a tool or weapon of domestication and discipline and of identification, subjection, and resistance. These accounts are insightful and constitute an important conceptual foundation for this research.

3.2. Constructions of agency: Coping, rationality and transaction of suffering

Catherine Burns reaches a conclusion similar to Cahill’s about a theoretical and practical option for understanding agency by taking a different route. In her book, “Sexual violence and the law in Japan” (2005), Burns demonstrates that patriarchy is not monolithic; the nature of power is localized, scattered and never complete. Therefore, there are always some possibilities for resistance and agency. More particularly, Burns contends that if “the body is inscribed with dominant discourses” and can be read as a text, then it “can be re-inscribed, at least to a limited extent, with alternative discourses” (2005:34). According to Burns, even when a woman presents herself as a victim it does not imply that she is lacking agency. Whenever she decides to speak out and file a formal complaint, this means she has resisted the strong social pressure to remain silent. Resistance should be here understood in the context of presenting as victim. For this
reason, the woman’s resistance is a central element in her constructions of an appropriate victim image with an aim of presenting a credible account to the criminal justice in a court case (Burns, 2005).

Of course, it would be a mistake to underrate the agentic capacities of those women who keep silent about their assault. Alternatively, they can accept and transform their silence into positive descriptions. For instance, Veena Das (2004) provides an analysis of how the transaction between body and language can serve as one path towards healing for those who were subjected to sexual violence (in this case, during the Partition in India). Das delineates two forms of transforming the pain from the surface to the depth of the body. In the first, the rapee used the metaphor of pregnancy-hiding pain, “giving it a home just as a child is given a home in the woman’s body” (2004:331). Nevertheless, Das contends that this holding of the pain inside will “never be allowed to be born” - the surface of the body becomes “a carnival of images and the depth becomes the site for hysterical pregnancies” (ibid. 331). In the second form, “these memories were sometimes compared to poison that makes the inside of the woman dissolve, as a solid is dissolved in a powerful liquid” (ibid.330), and she metaphorically “drinks” the pain “so that life could continue” (ibid.332).

Evidently, when women cannot speak out about their experiences, they often find a way to convert the passivity into a form of agency geared towards the socialized efforts or psychic urgency to curtail traumatic memories. More concretely, in a cultural environment that discriminates against women, silence may well be perceived as a solution. Although it is by no means a desirable option, it is an understandable one; the decision to keep silent about the assault has a certain advantage in a context of limited alternatives. This comes very close to what David Morris has noted elsewhere, “suffering is voiceless in the metaphorical sense that silence becomes a sign of something ultimately unknowable” (1997:27), and thus, “suffering implies agency just as agency implies suffering” (Gammeltoft, 2006:600). Viewed in this light, the female body is the object of processes of domination and control as well as the site of women’s subversive practices and struggles for self-determination and empowerment (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1997).12

12 See Rydström (2003) for a descriptive analysis of the way a woman’s body is transformed into a material symbol of a female’s assumed social flexibility in the case of domestic violence in Vietnam.
Both Cahill and Burns are primarily concerned with the possibilities of resistance and agency in the context of rape, a crime that is often perceived as the inevitable consequence of superior male strength reinforced by natural male aggression and patriarchal structures. Both remind us that rape scripts or the power dynamics underlying these scripts do not completely undermine the subject. Earlier on, in her ground-breaking essay, “Throwing like a girl,” Iris Young suggests that when a woman lives her space as confined and closed around her, she can “exist as a free subject,” at least in some small area (1990:155).

4. Conceptualizing the socio-cultural specific: The case of Vietnam

How plausible is the operationalization of the relational autonomy concept in the context of Vietnam? Of what value is this in practice? And to what extent are socially shaped agents aware of other alternatives to the sets of values and mores they have internalized?

In searching for answers, I shall examine the role of kinship relations in the decision of whether or not to bring the case to light, and the impact these relations may have on the coping strategy of female rapees in the aftermath of the incidence. I also look at how moral values and cultural notions related to gender relations, sexuality and sexual violence that are reflected in social institutions such as the law and the media. Above all I want to find out what these women think about their rape-related experiences and how they exert their relational autonomy within the transitional context of present-day Vietnam.

4.1. From kinship influences towards a social imaginary

It is appropriate to look at a less studied variable in rape research, namely the role of kinship structure which still carries considerable weight especially in rural areas of Vietnam. The empirical works undertaken by Rhea Almeida and Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio (1999), Imam and Akhtar (2005) indicate that patriarchy in Asian cultures takes

13 See Gammeltoft (2007) for an illustrative example of the way the entire kin-group joins in a discussion regarding “kin-related matters” before an important decision is made; see also Werner (2009), Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (2010) for an explanation that the emergence of the household economy has contributed to the reassertion of kinship ties in the wake of the Đổi Mới.
a different form from patriarchy in the West. For example, in the case of rape, the notion of family honor is used as a distinctive patriarchal tool to restrain the rapee’s choice in pressing charges against the rapist. In passing, I want to touch briefly on the phenomenon of “honor crimes” which are carried out in the name of family honor and manifested under various forms in some countries of South Asia, the Middle East and among migrant communities in a number of Western European countries (Mayell, 2002; Kogacioglu, 2004; Hussain, 2006; Baxter, 2007). These acts of violence usually are committed by male family members against female family members who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family such as being victims of rape. In the context of this study I will explore how the notion of “family honor” is manifested not by acts of violence but through efforts of negotiating a settlement and/or finding ways at the family and kin level to deal with social consequences caused by the rape of a family member. As families and communities are closely knit in a collectivist culture, this concern for family honor is both implicit and explicit in the rapees’ (and their families’) fear that exposure of their victimization might bring them disrepute. This, in some instances, may force rapees to flee from the communities to which they belong in order to preserve the honor of the other members of their families.

The portrait of raped women that I am presenting here is one that highlights Charles Taylor (2004)’s conceptual notion of the social imaginary. It sheds light on “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (2004:23). The social imaginary notion is complementary to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which explains how social norms - or doxa - become embodied in the hexus of individual human beings, both female and male. An individual’s habitus emerges from the social circumstances in which the individual lives and acts, the objective limits of social action that Bourdieu terms the field (Bourdieu, 1977; cf. McNay, 1999; Adkins, 2003). In this line of thinking, social and cultural contexts are more than a backdrop upon which female rapees’ actual choices are projected; they should be seen from the women’s perspectives, and in relation to their experiences of social inequality as a result of patriarchy. In the
following section I look at cultural narratives as a further elaboration of Bourdieu’s habitus and Taylor’s social imaginary within the relational autonomy concepts.

4.2. Cultural narratives in the law and the media

For the purpose of analyses, I draw on Susan James and Gary Foster’s conceptualization of cultural narratives, which offers “a contextual structure for understanding specific historical, spiritual and cultural factors that shape the identity of an individual from within that culture” (2003:68) In cases involving sexual violence these cultural narratives are made explicit in explanations/interpretations (i.e. a woman cannot be raped without her consent; only young stereotypically “attractive” women are raped; women “ask for it;” nothing bad could happen to good girls; rapists are sex-crazed “madmen,” etc.) that come from the dominant discourse of masculinity, femininity and sexuality (cf. Ryan, 1971; Costin and Schwarz, 1987). Therefore it is important to see whether this cultural narrative is internalized by the women themselves (Meyers, 2002) through the process of “interpellation,” to use Antonio Gramsci’s term, which is “a process of psycho-adaptation” to specific conditions (i.e. work, customs, housing, nutrition, etc). It is not something “natural” or innate, but “has to be acquired” and “absorbed in the development of childhood and adolescence” (Gramsci, 1971:296; cf. Althusser, 2001; Truong, 2009).

In addition I examine these cultural narratives in the guise of public discourses as represented in the media and court files of rape cases in the sense that cultural narratives, as suggested by Iain McCalman, are those stories that circulate widely and insistently across many media within a specific society or set of societies over a given period of time.

What concerns us here is discourse on sexuality and gender in which women and men are constructed as different social beings - discourse that has shaped gender relations and attitudes toward sexuality (MacKinnon, 1997; Young, 1997). Male sexuality is generally portrayed as active, aggressive, and powerful, while female sexuality is seen as essentially passive, submissive and powerless. These traits are likely to make women,

namely those who do not conform to the patterns of institutionalized morality, more subject to rape. At the same time, these understandings of “eroticized violence” (Burns, 2005: 17) frame judicial decision-making in cases of sexual violence against women. Thus women’s experiences and perspectives that do not comply with the particular experiences and ideas that contribute to popular perceptions of the ways thing are (Schepple, 1987), in this case conventional understandings of rape, are thereby disqualified or silenced (Burns, 2005). Furthermore, the metaphorical meaning of virginity as a symbol of the social cohesion of family and community and its disruption as a dishonor to all concerned, leaves women in a particular vulnerable position (Manderson and Bennett, 2003). In performing socially approved gender roles, women are typically charged with the task of maintaining “family integrity” and ensuring social stability. Disclosure of sexual violence or knowledge of its existence brings them disrepute, and they will be blamed and forced to carry the burden of stigma and shame. If the incident is hidden to avoid stigma, then they have to bear the burden of silence and social isolation. Therefore, the women subjected to violence, rather than the men who inflict it, often assume responsibility for defending family honor by maintaining silence in order to protect their family from disgrace and shame.

4.3. A mosaic of a transitional society

Much has been written about the social upheavals in Vietnam brought about by the process of transformation from a centralized economy to a market-oriented economy over the past two decades. In this study I will limit myself to examining how female rapees and their families deal with the aftermath of rape in the present social environment. For example, I examine whether the new market economy that has a loosening effect on the kinship structure (Gammeltoft, 2007) in turn may allow rapees more space to exercise their agency. While following Jayne Werner (2009)’s argument that kinship provides the underlying structure of the family and social practices, I wish to explore whether the patrilineal kinship system can still be conceived as a moral realm, with constituting/governing members bonded together in a web of ethical ties in the new

15 See for example, Scott et al. (2010), Barbieri & Bélanger (2009), Jacobs (2008), Trịnh Duy Luân, Rydström & Burghoorn (2008).
social-economic setting. I also to find out how women - in this case the rapees - can avail themselves of the new moral values that emerge in the wake of Đổi Mới to pursue their own agendas.

In short, the intellectual purpose of this dissertation is to examine the ways in which women develop strategies while experiencing and responding to the predicament of rape, and more importantly, to explore to what extent these individuals’ coping behavior is informed by their cultural framework, i.e. the cultural norms and beliefs shared by members of their ethnic group. Knowing this would take us further in trying to understand if and how these women can reason and act in creative, novel ways so as to go on with their lives in the aftermath of rape.

Summary

Listening to experiences of female rapees will provide important insights into the nature of the self and/or self-survival. As David Marr (2000) has indicated in his discussion of the concept of the individual and the self in Vietnam, there are long-established Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist explanations of the self before the Western, mostly French colonial, ideas entered the Vietnamese vocabulary during the early 1900s. It is challenging to rethink Western/de-westernized core notions of autonomy, integrity, and identity by focusing on the women’s life narratives in a specific cultural non-western context. Moreover, I am intrigued by Susan Brison’s view of the autonomous self, arguing that survivors of trauma recover to a greater or lesser extent depending on responses to them from others (2002). Brison also points out that, “aspects of trauma and recovery reveal the deeply social nature of one’s sense of self and underscore the limits of the individual’s capacity to control her own definition” (2002: 64). This argument is no doubt valid but I wonder how female rapees can recover from their trauma without disclosing it to anyone, and thus would not get any responses from others. What would it be for rapees to be unheard? This may be the case of rapees living in societies where traditionally sex-related transgressions are considered as taboo in terms of public acknowledgement and discussion. If so, are there “alternatives” for a rapee to regain control over her life, particularly in the transitional context of Vietnamese society nowadays? This is one of the main questions my research aims to give an answer.
By adopting the relational autonomy approach regarding rapees in my research, I hope to enlarge this theoretical conception in the sense that it could create a new perspective on the workings of ethnicity and specific characteristics of non-western societies as well. Since crimes of a sexual nature have been extensively studied in western societies, further research in non-western societies such as Vietnam may shed new light on (and extend the scope of) existing theories about the interaction between power, gender, mobility, and ethnicity in the realm of sexual violence.

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