

Intercorporeality of Disability:
The Social Production and Personal Embodiment of
Agent Orange in Hanoi, Vietnam

My first day back at the Friendship Village in Hanoi was certainly not what I had imagined it to be. As I planned my research the months leading up to my departure, I looked excitedly forward to seeing all of the children I had met last summer as a patient care intern. My interactions with them last year as I assisted in their classes and in their physical therapy sessions had left a deep impression on me, and I was elated that my research was bringing me back to the place and people I had begun to cherish as my own family. Anticipating an overly happy reunion, my first day back at the Village had left me a little underwhelmed, disappointed, and frustrated. Almost everything I had remembered about the Friendship Village had stayed the same; the children still went to the same classes, slept in the same rooms, and even had the same meal schedules; but it seemed that my relationship with them had been lost with time. Instead of welcoming me back graciously, almost half had forgotten who I was, and those who did remember were more concerned with *why* I had come back. Not even a full day in, and I had already begun to lose confidence in my self and my ability to do the research that I had set out to do.

Throughout my four weeks of fieldwork I encountered a number of challenges, which included everything from personal, academic, and logistical matters; and to be honest, as a first-time student researcher, I knew from the beginning that my research experience would not be as smooth as I had planned it. The objectives of my study were to (1) examine how certain social entities have learned about and understand Agent Orange, and (2) to examine how their

relationships with victims of Agent Orange may affect how the victims then understand and feel about their disabilities. The former, social perceptions of Agent Orange, was easily gauged through semi-structured interviews. As I had expected, however, the latter, social production and *embodiment* of Agent Orange, proved to be very difficult concepts to quantify. Prior to my departure, Professor Porter and I had decided that it would be best to break *embodiment* into its components, which includes, for example, the victims' sense and act of movement, affect, and agency. I knew that such data would require thorough and thoughtful participant observation of the Friendship Village's daily activities. Prepared to do so, I was surprised and frustrated to actually discover that for some reason, some of the social entities I had intended to study, interacted very little with the victims compared to what I had observed the previous year. In the physical therapy room, for example, throughout my four weeks of afternoon observation, there was only one or two days when the therapists would actually work with the victims, or residents. On most days, what few residents did come to therapy, although older and more acquainted with the exercises they needed to do, were often left to their own discretion to do whatever they pleased during the session, exercise or no-exercise. Without being able to witness as much interaction as I would have liked, as I move forward with analyzing my research, I expect that I will have to rely more heavily on my interviews than observations to address the question of *embodiment*. I was, however, invited on a day trip by a Vietnamese volunteer to visit nearby provinces with two of the older residents. Although only one of the residents was able to go as a result of strict Friendship Village policy, it was still a great opportunity for me to observe the resident's sense of agency and self-perception in the public eye, outside and beyond the relatively confined grounds of the Friendship Village.

Interviews, however, also proved to be a bit of a challenge, as most participants were very shy and reserved, which I believe can in part be attributed to cultural norms. Given the circumstances and the potentially sensitive topic matter, it was also understandable that my interviewees tended to give short, succinct answers, even after my several attempts to probe further. Additionally, I was surprised how hesitant people were to sign the consent forms required by the IRB. It seemed that rather than recognizing it as my responsibility to inform them of the details of my study, many initially regarded it as a legal document. With the assistance of my interpreter, who helped me to reassure participants that there were no risks to my voluntary study, we managed to complete twenty interviews, only a few short of my original proposal.

One of the biggest challenges I faced throughout my four weeks of fieldwork was learning how to manage my experiences as not only a researcher with a clear objective, but also as a real person forging relationships, having experiences, and being overcome by emotions. Part of the frustration that I felt in my first few days of fieldwork, for example, came from my disbelief in how much one of the residents had changed. As I listened to her telling me about being okay with living at home with her parents for the rest of her life, I recalled how she had been so motivated and eager the year before to go to trade school, find a job, and live independently. I did not know how to respond to her. As her friend of one year, I wanted to remind her of the fiery enthusiasm that she had seemingly lost and to encourage her to persevere; but as a researcher, I wanted to also make sure that I preserved the integrity of my study, remaining a respectful listener and impartial confidant. That same night, as I expressed my dilemma to Professor Porter via skype, she reminded me that while it was important to refrain from passing judgment, that it would be completely appropriate for me to express my surprise,

using my reaction to ask questions about why she felt the way she did, delving exactly into what would turn out to be the core matters of my research.

As I reflect on my research experience this summer, I feel that my research would have benefitted from a longer stay. For example, I would have really enjoyed the opportunity to officially interview the Vietnamese veterans living at the Friendship Village. From the casual conversations I had with them, they offered such fascinating insight on the legacy of Agent Orange and the impact it has had not only on their own health but potentially their own children and grandchildren. Unfortunately, since I did not include veterans in my original IRB submission, and then was unable to have an amendment approved in time, any information they shared with me cannot be included in my research. Still, I am overjoyed to have had the opportunity to speak and learn from them for my own edification.

As I begin the analysis stages of my study, I know that there is much work left to be done with sorting out my notes and observations and with doing further conceptual research to form a cohesive paper. Although the idea of research has never ceased to be a little daunting, I am grateful for the opportunities that the Kellogg and Kroc Institutes have allowed me, and look forward to learning and growing as a student and anthropologist as I go through the process of completing my research under Professor Porter's advisement. My hope is that my research will contribute to the ever-increasing study of caretaking, intercorporeality, and modes of disability as it applies to victims of Agent Orange, and beyond.