

About me

My name is Thu Thuy Phan. I was born in Vietnam, but I grew up in Budapest, Hungary. I am a third year PhD student based in the Institute of Health and Wellbeing, the University of Glasgow. I was trained as a medical anthropologist at the University of Oxford, and my current research examines the everyday citizenship practices of people with significant learning disabilities through the doing and making of art. I was awarded the Mac Robertson Scholarship (£3978) in my second year of studies, which enabled me to spend three months at Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Sweden.



Me enjoying winter in the industrial district of Uppsala.

Why did I apply for the travel scholarship?

For my doctoral studies, I set out to examine what citizenship means for people with significant learning disabilities. In the past two decades, the term citizenship has been a keyword in British learning disability policy. Yet, social policy conceptualisation of citizenship is based on Kantian notions of personhood, which emphasises verbal language, reason, and rationality. This transpires in social policy that seeks to promote the citizenship of people with learning disabilities through increasing their choice, inclusion, and employment, which, when coupled with a neoliberal arrangement of service provision, often results in neglect, exclusion, and experiences of isolation. My PhD seeks to reconceptualise notions of choice, inclusion, social contribution, and ultimately citizenship, beyond the Kantian and neoliberal framework. Subsequently, I conducted 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork at a Glasgow-based arts organisation that provides workshops for people with learning disabilities. The workshops provided an alternative account of citizenship, as well as an anthropological understanding to agency and sociality.

My research sits at the intersections of disability studies and anthropology. While the topic of learning disability lends itself to the theoretical and political debates in anthropology, so far there has been very little anthropological engagement in the subject of disabilities in general. One notable exception is Professor Don Kulick at Uppsala University, who is one of the few anthropologists who have conducted ethnographic research with people with significant disabilities to examine the sexual lives of those who do not have the capacity to express themselves verbally or with assistive technologies. I applied to the Mac Robertson scholarship to be able to work under supervision of someone like Professor Kulick and being part of his research group, and thus develop my theoretical framework and analytical skillset.

Details of my visit

I spent three months (October-December 2018) at Uppsala University, the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. I timed my visit to coincide with the end of my ethnographic fieldwork and with the start of my data analysis and writing up period. During my stay, I worked with the Engaging Vulnerability research group headed by Don Kulick. This research group comprises anthropologists, philosophers, linguists, and political scientists. Its aim is to examine the ways in which vulnerability can be understood as a productive position, which perfectly resonates with the broad theoretical approach of my dissertation.

My primary aims with the visit were:

1) to develop new research skills, and to meet and establish working relationships with researchers from the field of ethnographic social research with vulnerable groups, and learn about the diverse methodological, theoretical, and epistemological approaches to qualitative data other researchers utilise in their works, and



People in Uppsala kept apologising about the bad Swedish weather. For someone from the West of Scotland, they felt like part-timers.

2) to add a theoretical and analytical depth to my PhD dissertation and gain analytical and theoretical tools to approach my own ethnographic data as well as help me situate my work within the field of qualitative social science research with vulnerable groups.

During my stay at Uppsala University, I participated in the weekly Anthropology and the Engaging Vulnerability seminar series, which kept me up to date with current research in the field of anthropology, as well as provided me with an infusion of cutting-edge social theory. Being able to

participate in the discussions placed me back in the field of anthropology, something I deeply missed in Glasgow. The discussions that I found particularly informative for my own work relates to ways in which agency can be exerted under bureaucratic structures, alternative frameworks of social justice to replace social contract theories and conceiving of agency beyond the resistance-oppression dichotomy.

I further had the chance to partake in the writing workshop lead by Don, where each week a group of postgraduate students read and gave feedback on someone's work in progress. I was inspired by the high quality of people's work and feedback. I learnt about writing as text, especially from Don, whose writing style I have admired since I read his works in my undergraduate studies. I further had the opportunity to present a chapter I wrote during my visit. The generous and detailed feedback I received did not only contribute to the work I

presented but continues to frame my writing process and perhaps the whole of my dissertation. Particularly, I learnt how to structure the ethnographic data as argument, how to describe characters to make them memorable, and how to weave theory into the text without bogging down the narrative. The workshops also drew my attention to the importance of the rhythm and poetry of the text and reinforced my view that academic writing can be artistic and reader-friendly as well as rigorous and communicating complex ideas.

Since many of the Uppsala doctoral students started their process of data analysis while I was visiting, I gave an introductory workshop on NVivo, a qualitative analytic software. During the three-months period of my visit, I finished my data analysis, and wrote a first draft for my first chapter.



The English Park Campus basking in the late autumn sun.



Uppsala as winter wonderland.

Perhaps being able to meet the researchers working in Uppsala was the most valuable part of my whole visit. I gained the most insightful comments, theoretical directions, and list for further readings during my informal conversations with my peers and the research fellows. The conversations in the lunchroom, pubs, cafes, and cigarette breaks reinforced my view that much of the academic creativity emerges organically in informal settings. Additionally, I met with scholars working on disability in the Department of Sociology, and I also

hung out with Professor Simo Vehmas, a leading disability scholar who is currently based at the University of Stockholm.

Impact of the Travel Scholarship

The visit that the scholarship enabled contributed to my work in many ways. As detailed above, it exposed me to debates and theories I was not aware of, opened my eyes to a whole new way of academic writing, and infused me with a newfound enthusiasm regarding my research that I felt was flagging by the end of my fieldwork. I continue to experience the benefits of the academic connections I made: with Don offering to



The joys of Swedish cuisine: a whole shelf of tube cheese, including three different types of prawn flavour.

read all my upcoming dissertation chapters, and with Simo's recent visit to the latest Disability Seminar series. I met fantastic and inspiring people who showed me that academia can be generous, kind, and fun. I also experienced an institutional culture where doctoral students were treated as employees with all the academic support, benefits of social security, and welfare provisions that are essential for academic excellence yet so often disregarded in work environments. This opened my eyes to an alternative world of academia where universities still function as public institutions with an accountability towards their employees and the broader society, and less as businesses that prioritise shareholder interests over responsibilities towards the public good.

Besides the academic activities, I made use of my stay in a country I have never visited before. I spent many weekends in Stockholm, visited the Stockholm film festival with one of my PhD fellows, cycled around Uppsala, witnessed the Swedish version of the International being sung at a house party, learnt to survive in minus 15 degrees, indulged in Swedish culinary pleasures, baked cinnamon buns with sociologists, experienced the pros and cons of the Swedish alcohol monopoly, established the habit of communal cigarettes in the research lunchroom (which, I was informed, is still thriving), and made lifelong friends.

The travel scholarship enabled all these experiences, which will continue to shape me as an academic and as a person.



Some of the fellow PhD researchers who made my trip a wonderful experience. I owe much to the travel scholarship as it enabled me to meet these extraordinary people.