

***Inter-narrative Pattern Based on a Relativistic Cultural Perspective:
A Proposed Solution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)***

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Abstract

A perspective based on cultural relativism is noticed as a solution when addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) associated with social and human issues. The reality is that when we address the SDGs related to the themes of culture, society, equality, and cooperation, we have to face conflicts and collisions between cultural value systems in terms of identity side. Any personal identity tied to a community's socio-political identity must be seen as shaped in interaction with space and time, that is, within a specific period of time. It is not an inherent characteristic that we must look for because once we assume that identity is the essential property that we must look for, we default to separating this one value from other values. Therefore, comparing and positioning one value with different values is very risky. From the perspective of cultural relativism, we realize that emphasizing one value as superior or more important than another is inappropriate. A metaphysical proposal based on the inter-narrative model can be formulated as a dialogue between differences based on respect and harmony. This proposal emphasizes that harmony between private space and common interests is guaranteed when the "unconditional commandment" of personal happiness is not only meaningful to the owner's personal life and experience but also aims to create a viable network of connections that expands the private sphere, and combines them towards a common purpose. This article will analyze sustainable development goals' social and human issues and propose solutions based on inter-narrative metaphysics.

Keywords: Inter-narrative, Cultural Relativism, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Among the 17 SDGs under the United Nations 2030 Agenda, the SDGs groups related to the social aspect always bring about controversies and conflicts when the implementation touches the customs, living habits, and behaviors of ethnic minority groups. “Relativity” in Richard Rorty’s perspective is consistent with the concept of “liberal hope”, honoring the “imagination” and “self-creation” of the cognitive subject. This proposal is applied as a metaphysical foundation of intersubjectivity because cultural relativism does not impose subjectivity on considering the cognitive object. The process of explaining and understanding a cultural, social, and human object must come from within the culture in which the object is formed.

Franz Boas’s theory also proves that cultural relativism does not deny the role of individual perspectives and standard systems. However, to evaluate other cultures according to one’s standards, one must understand the values and standards of other cultures and not be bound by the values and standards of one’s own culture. This leads to planning in thinking and action when implementing the SDGs related to the social aspect that different social contexts create different values and standards. This does not mean that we should unconditionally accept other cultural models without bias in their context. Every assessment is always personal. Each individual has the right to comment and re-describe the object according to cognitive ability, data, and perspective. However, a standard model for sustainable development must go beyond individual values to aim at a common value.

1. Multidimensional Perspectives on a Custom

The story of sustainable development and its social and human aspects is always an essential and sensitive topic. All development plans and solutions must not stand within the interests and care of people. People are both the subject and the object of sustainable development. However, it is sensitive in that, in approaching and providing solutions related to people and society, it is inevitable to avoid sensitive and difficult-to-access topics, which are the customs that have been attached for a long time in ethnic communities. These customs sometimes contradict sustainable development goals and even cause negative consequences.

Let’s take an example of a long-standing custom, which is “Bride kidnapping” (pulling wife) is a common practice among the Hmong community in northern Vietnam.

Sung Thi So, a Hmong girl born in 2002, was kidnapped and forced to be a wife three times. The last time she was kidnapped, she thought about committing suicide to free herself. However, all the fears and prohibitions were small compared to the fear of missing out on the university entrance exam. The dream of creating a better life for herself was enough to keep her alive.

A few months after escaping to her parents’ home, Sung Thi So was admitted to Hanoi Law University with an impressive score of 28.5 out of 30 in the university entrance exam. That same year, her resilience and determination helped her win the Yen Bai “Outstanding Ethnic Minority Student” award for the 2020-2021 school year.

“After being kidnapped three times to be a wife, I was determined to study law. I want girls like me in remote areas to have equal access to education, as well as respect and freedom to choose their marriage path,” So shared.¹

In the past, despite studying at a boarding school in the district, Sung Thi So still became a victim of bride kidnapping. The first time So experienced such a thing was in 8th grade. A strange boy from a neighboring village kidnapped her during the local New Year festival. The second time, she was kidnapped by a boy from another village just before she entered high school.

From a sympathetic perspective, we would probably be outraged and want to abolish this custom immediately. A custom that, from the perspective of equality and fairness for women, is crazy and backward. However, let us look at another perspective.

The custom of “bride kidnapping” is a unique tradition only found in the Hmong ethnic minority. In ancient times, material products such as food or jewelry were in short supply due to backward living and production conditions and low labor productivity. Meanwhile, marriage ceremonies and customs required expensive wedding gifts such as silver coins, buffaloes, pigs, chickens, wine, rice, etc.; some men at that time could not afford to get married.

There were Hmong couples who loved each other and promised to live together for life, but due to difficulties, they could not come together; moreover, due to self-respect, the girls could not go live with the boys before officially getting engaged. Therefore, the Hmong came up with the idea of “bride kidnapping” for couples in difficulty to solve their difficulties and start married life. If the couple loves each other from before but does not have enough money to pay the dowry or the girl’s parents disagree, the two will discuss a plan for the man to perform the wife-capturing ceremony.

On the appointed day, the man appears with his friends to “capture” the girl and bring her home. The “pulling wife” custom usually occurs at night. According to customs, once the girl has gone to the groom's house, her soul has entered it, and it is not easy to return. On the third day, the groom's family sends someone to the bride's house to officially inform that the girl has been taken to the groom's house to get married, and at the same time, ask the bride's family for permission to hold the wedding ceremony, set the time and agree on the gifts. According to Hmong tradition, the wife-capturing ceremony must always be held, then the wedding can take place. The custom of catching wives usually takes place in early spring. According to the Hmong people, “pulling wives” is a good custom, both a part of the wedding ceremony as a form of “reasoning” of the Hmong people and also shows the value of women because when a woman is pulled back to be a wife, it proves her value. Therefore, many women are proud to be “pulling wive,” and men, when they decide to “pull wives,” must be responsible for their wives.²

2. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Concerning the Social Aspect

In the United Nations 2030 Agenda, member states agreed on 17 sustainable development goals in 2015. These goals are divided into three main groups according to the “wedding

¹ Source: <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/trend/a-hmong-girls-journey-from-kidnapped-to-attorney-4721696.html>

² Source: <https://en.qdnd.vn/culture-sports/culture/bride-kidnapping-a-fine-custom-of-hmong-people-537528>

cake” model: economic, social, and environmental aspects. In the group of the Social Goals and Indicators, including SDG 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, and 16, are considered an important and essential dimension to measure the development of a country and the sustainability of the whole world because they focus on enhancing and maintaining the productivity of human resources through successive generations. This group of goals requires the utilization and maintenance of essential social services such as health and education and ensuring social equity in distributing natural resources without depleting them. The social dimension of the SDGs includes a set of targets and indicators that measure overall progress and are linked to other economic and environmental dimensions.

- SDG 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages.
- SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, ensuring women's rights to access health care and education services and to participate fully in political and economic life.
- SDG 6 aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- SDG 10 aims to reduce inequalities within and between countries.
- SDG 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

When we talk about social goals and indicators, it is clear that the issues we analyze in the example of the “pulling wife” custom of the Hmong people in northern Vietnam can easily lead to sensitive and negative consequences. How do we approach this issue most accurately? That is the first question. The next question is how do we prevent a custom closely linked to the lifestyle and production of ethnic minorities from affecting the overall picture of development for the common good?

3. A Relativistic Cultural Perspective

Balancing and reconciling sustainable development goals that bring shared values to the community and cultural characteristics of local and regional areas requires an inter-narrative approach based on cultural relativism.

First, let us discuss the issue of the individual and the community. According to Richard Rorty, the formation of an individual's self cannot be separated from the network of interactions between him/her and the external environment to which he/she belongs. The self must be seen as an entity with fundamental characteristics dependent of the external environment.

Our language, as much as our bodies, are shaped by our environment. Our languages could no more be “out of touch” with our environment (grandiosely the world) than our bodies could [...] Rorty is thoroughly Darwinian. That is, like all the other pragmatists, Rorty, takes Darwin seriously and tailors his account to fit and build on Darwin. (Nielsen, *Richard Rorty* in Shook & Margolis, 2009, p. 132)

That is, an individual cannot be understood as an entity that exists independently of the living spaces and interactions of which he/she is a member. Rorty’s consistent view has been that the subject can only form an experienced self in interaction with others in a specific context.

This helps us understand clearly the approach to the relationship between individual life and community life.

In a follow-up commentary, Patricia Rohrer has linked Rorty's ideas to Taylor's in a more nuanced and practically feasible way by softening Rorty's beliefs and comparing them to Charles Taylor's ideas that the purpose of the private sphere is to strive for private happiness (the meaning of life) and the purpose of the community is to pursue common interests rather than opposed interests.

Rorty proposes a cultural relativism in which it is inappropriate to emphasize one value as dominant or more important than another. Any personal identity related to the sociopolitical identity of a community must be seen as formed in interaction with space and time, that is, a specific period. It is not an inherent feature that we have to find because once we assume that identity is an essential property that we have to find, we automatically separate one value from others and thus risk comparing and positioning one value against others. Harmony between private happiness and the common good is ensured when the "unconditional commandment" for private happiness makes sense for the subject's personal life and experience and aims to create a viable network of connections that expand the private sphere and incorporate the communal purpose.

Rohrer's account of "unconditional commandments" focuses primarily on the social and moral conditions in the search for a rational and non-confrontational extension between individuals and communities. As Taylor suggests, the self is defined by identifications and commitments that "which provide the frame or horizon within [...] which I am capable of taking a stand."³ An individual's identity cannot be defined by rational or metaphysical grounds but on moral and spiritual commitments to "the nation or tradition to which they belong."⁴ However, this can only happen if we define the self in a larger dimension – a moral orientation – that exists not only in the private sphere but also as the individual's ability to govern space.

It is a type of cultural relativism that does not impose itself on how an object of cognition is viewed. The process of interpretation and understanding must come from within the culture in which the object is formed. This perspective is similar to the theory proposed by Franz Boas and his colleagues, who proposed a cultural relativism that does not deny the role of personal perspectives and systems of standards. However, to evaluate other cultures according to an individual's standards, the individual must understand the values and standards of other cultures and not be bound by the values and standards of his own culture. This proposal also emphasizes that different social contexts create different values and standards. However, this does not mean we should unconditionally accept other cultural models unbiased in their context. Every evaluation is always personal. Each individual has the right to comment on and describe the subject according to his or her cognitive abilities, data, and views.

Conclusion

Under Vietnam's Penal Code, so-called "bride kidnapping" (or pulling wife) can be charged with unlawful arrest, detention, or imprisonment and face up to two years in prison or up to

³ See Taylor, Charles (1989), pp. 27.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 27.

ten years if the crime is considered severe. Those who assist in the kidnapping can also be prosecuted as accomplices.

In a “bride kidnapping” incident that occurred in Quy Hop district, Nghe An province, in 2017, the men involved in the attempted kidnapping of a young girl were summoned for a warning. Authorities in many mountainous areas in northern Vietnam have been asked to encourage local ethnic communities to abandon their outdated and illegal “bride kidnapping” practice. Legal experts admit that it will only change for a while because the practice is deeply ingrained in the lives and culture of local people.

The inter-narrative approach, based on cultural relativism, provides a cognitive and educational solution to address sustainable development goals and ensure harmony in preserving Indigenous cultural values.

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