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Globalization and Life History Research:  
Fragments of a Life Foretold

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to understand, by way of a life history of one low-income working class youth, how globalization impacts the working class in a developing nation. The concept of globalization and the method of life history seem diametrically opposed.

Globalization is an idea about large social forces that impact the economic and material conditions of nations. Life history assumes that understanding the specific context of one person is paramount. The author takes issue with the idea that the two concepts are incompatible and instead suggests that life history affords a way to come to terms with globalization that is often missing from large cross-national studies. The text suggests that life history provides opportunities for understanding globalization from a new vantage point that does not contradict previous research, but instead lends depth and understanding about how individuals act and react to the forces of globalization.

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“What to do, prof, what to do?” asks Shahir, one afternoon as we slurp noodles at a roadside stand between meetings I have arranged. We have been speaking about one of our common topics: the problems associated with raising the money necessary for a dowry so that he might get married. Shahir (a pseudonym) is a 25 year old dark-skinned Muslim Malay. He speaks halting English that is buttressed by his desire to make himself understood so that I might fully comprehend the complexity of his young life. He finished the equivalent of sophomore year in high school and since then has had a variety of jobs aimed at augmenting the income his parents receive from his father’s pension, and saving enough money to get married.

By the time I leave Malaysia I will have spent 60 hours in formal interviews and informal conversations with Shahir. My intent is to understand, by way of a life history, how globalization impacts the working class in a developing nation. The concept of globalization and the method of life history seem diametrically opposed. On the one hand, globalization is an idea about large social forces that impact the economic and material conditions of nations. The manner one traditionally conducts research about globalization is with large data-sets that provide cross-national comparisons. On the other hand, life history assumes that understanding the specific context of one person is paramount, and it is best understood by using the individual as the unit of analysis. The traditional purpose of life history is to develop a text that gives readers an inside view of the culture and identity of a particular person.

In what follows, I take issue with the idea that the two concepts are incompatible and instead suggest that life history affords a way to come to terms with globalization that is often missing from large cross-national studies. I suggest that life history provides opportunities for understanding globalization from a new vantage point that does not contradict previous research, but instead lends depth and understanding about how individuals act and react to the forces of

globalization. **Once we understand this relationship, how education and globalization interact might be better understood. I also need to point out what this text is not about: although Shahir is Malaysian and the country is undergoing significant changes due to globalization, the essay is not an exegesis on Malaysian politics and history. Similarly, although I employed life history in attempting to chronicle how globalization is impacting Shahir's life, I am not attempting to do a review of the literature on life history. Rather, my purpose here is more to raise questions for the reader instead of providing answers. A good life history should be provocative and enable the reader to think about the issues raised in the text rather than try to answer them as if one's life can be summarized in an essentialist fashion.**

#### Considering the Interplay between Globalization and Life History

##### *On Globalization*

One of the challenges of globalization is settling on a definition about what it is, and what it is not. As with any emerging theoretical term, globalization often stands as a proxy for other terms; capitalism, American culture, and Westernization are the most common synonyms. Of course, if globalization is nothing more than a substitute for one or another term then there is no need for its analysis. As I elaborate with regard to Shahir, globalization has something to do with capitalism, and with American values, and with Westernization, but globalization is also much more than simply the transmutation of economic or social values from one country to the next.

Held and McGrew (2002) suggest that globalization is the “widening, deepening and speeding up of world-wide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual” (p. 2). Although human societies always

have interacted with one another through trade, war, religion, and culture, globalization goes beyond such an easy observation and extends interconnectedness in multiple ways. The nation-state is, by and large, an artifact of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Globalization is, if not breaking down the idea of a nation with impermeable boundaries, at least helping us realize that borders are porous rather than rigid, ideological rather than geographic. Technology has speeded up communicative processes such that what once took months or years now takes minutes or hours, and how one receives messages depends less on geographic borders and more on technologies that have no boundaries. The result is that the relative isolation a working class individual such as Shahir may have experienced only a generation ago is now but a memory of how a people once lived.

Shahir's parents, for example, were born in the town where they have remained all of their lives. They visited Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia and a day's drive from their home, twice; both visits were in the last decade. They have never been on an airplane and the thought that they would is mildly comical to them, whereas Shahir assumes he will fly one day, perhaps within a year. They own a car, but it has never gone further than a few hours from the family apartment. Shahir boasts that his motorcycle "will take me as far as it can go" but he also always returns home to the apartment. His parents have never made a long distance call because they have not needed to, whereas Shahir uses the Internet, has a cell phone, and has investigated how to get to Mecca by looking at a website specifically designed for Malaysians who intend to participate in the Haj. He wants to go someplace "far away" on his honeymoon, perhaps Indonesia or Thailand.

Globalization exposes individuals to new ideas and lifestyles that may be radically at odds with the cultural and social mores of a people. **New technologies enable people to communicate in ways that were impossible for Shahir's father.** Although Shahir, as I will

discuss, is a devout Muslim, his ability to surf the Web about the Haj also means that he can surf it for pornographic websites. “I try not to,” he admits. “It’s bad. A violation. Harum [a sin].” His father did not have such a pervasive temptation **insofar as he could not access the internet every moment of every day. The internet in Malaysia also has become ubiquitous – one can access it, cheaply, from multiple locations.** Of course prostitution and brothels existed a generation ago, but the communicative technologies of globalization have shifted so that one is not simply a transition to the other as if what I am discussing is nothing more than the advance from a manual to an electric typewriter. As Shahir points out, “It’s everywhere. Sexy. Sexy. It’s wrong. It’s bad.” The point, then, is not so much that cultural homogenization is a fait accompli, as if every society will have a *Starbuck’s* on its street corners, but that people interpret, create and recreate globalizing processes in different manners and ways.

From this perspective, globalization breaks cultures apart, yet also brings them back together through individuals’ recreation of their lives. My ability to email Shahir from thousands of miles away maintains a connection between us, but his concentration and concern about what it means to be a good Muslim also stands in contrast to many aspects of life that I take as normal. The paradox, then, is that as we grow closer we also grow further apart. Clifford Geertz (1998) observed that the world “is growing both more global and divided, more thoroughly interconnected and more intricately partitioned at the same time” (p. 107). The interconnections of which Geertz wrote also are not mirrors of one another. Individuals and groups combine and recombine based on a myriad of cultural processes and histories, such that interpretive heterogeneity occurs at the same time that homogenization occurs. While the expectation grows in developing countries as well as in the industrial world, for example, that all individuals ought to be able to have access to particular kinds of goods and services, how one utilizes those goods

and services varies – as evidenced by Shahir’s use of the Web to find out about trips to Mecca, or his ability to listen to the call to prayer with an earphone for his radio while he drives me to an appointment, or the text messages he sends to his brother to tell his mother that he is not coming home to dinner because I need him to take me somewhere. Rather than having become simpler, the world has grown more complex.

For my purposes here, I am focusing more on the cultural mores and attitudes of globalization than on what has come to be thought of as neo-liberal economic policies and/or technological advances that have driven globalization. I work from the assumption that none of these presumably instrumental actions, such as trade policy or technology transfer, are a decultured medium that merely drive transnational development. People still interpret and reinterpret those larger processes in some fashion that bear down on them. These interpretations have larger consequences.

Such a viewpoint stands in contradistinction from what Leslie Sklair (2006) has labeled those who speak of globalization “suffused with a good deal of fatalism, popularly known as the TINA (there is no alternative) philosophy” (p. 101). I am suggesting that the idea of human agency exists such that individuals are capable of leading lives that they have helped determine, but globalization forces these same individuals to think about their lives in a manner that did not exist only a generation ago. The result is that major crises and daily interactions erupt in ways that no one could have envisioned.

If one is to put forward an agenda that counteracts those parts of globalization that are anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian, and serve to reinforce pernicious forms of power, then, one must first understand how individuals interpret their lives in a globalized world. No simple causal relationship exists as if globalization impacts individuals in one way, and of consequence

they will respond in another way. The result is that in order to understand how globalization impacts individuals we first must listen to those individuals to gauge how they interpret the lives they live, which suggests the import of life history.

### *On Life History*

The idea of culture as ‘things’ – the categorization of societies by way of rituals, symbols, functions, and objects – has long since been eschewed in favor of more interpretative strategies that focus on trying to come to terms with how people make meaning in life and how change occurs in society. Such an analysis, of course, rejects the TINA approach of globalization. Although some (Albrow, 2006; Friedman, 2006) have suggested how ethnography might be useful to understand globalization, there has been very little discussion of the utility of employing life history.

Just as methodologists have made advances in understanding how to undertake ethnographies in new ways, so too have life historians rethought how to think about conducting research (Plummer, 2001). In particular, the purpose of research is decidedly different from past studies that sought to explain individuals (Connell, 2006). Whereas Oscar Lewis, for example, in his remarkable work on the *Children of Sanchez* (1961) was trying to understand how the poor came to be poor, more recent work rejects the idea that a ‘subject’ can be objectified in such a manner. Instead, the “search is not so much about why someone acts in a particular way but about how it is that he or she has come to act that way” (Tierney, 1998, p. 55). Rather than focus on endpoints, the author elaborates on how individuals reached those endpoints. The assumption is that the world is interpretative and the individual, rather than being reactive, is a creator of that world.

Further, the sense that there is a whole ‘self’ that is coherent and understandable to an outside observer also has given way to a more emergent notion that identity is fluid, contradictory, and multi-vocal. One cannot reduce an individual to a singular identity—homeless, gay, Native American, Muslim—insofar as multiple influences cascade in on people all the time. Such a point, generally acknowledged in the literature on culture and method (Behar, 1993/2003; Bourgois, 1996; Lincoln, 1997; Tierney, 1995, 1999), is particularly important for studies seeking to understand globalization. Rather than unidirectional and singular, a study begins by accepting the multivocality and multidirectionality of a person’s identity.

And finally, the author is no longer absent from the text as if researchers are replaceable parts so long as one subscribes to commonly accepted notions of validity and reliability. Instead, the author’s relationship to the ‘subject’ takes on much greater emphasis. In Gelya Frank’s (2000) book, for example, the text is largely about the author’s relationship with the subject. **The author’s role, however, is much less determined. As opposed to an interpreter of texts – ‘this is what he/she means’ – the author struggles to enable the individual’s voice to be heard, and ultimately it is the reader’s responsibility to develop an interpretation. The text is much more interpreted and fluid than prepackaged. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) has spoken about the ability of life history as a decolonizing methodology. Ruth Nichols (2009) also has made a valuable contribution about the use of critical reflexive methods and its implications for the kind of work I am attempting here.** The result is that life histories have a great deal of representational variability. The voice of the author is more often than not present from some narrative register, although frequently not to the extent that one finds in Frank’s

work. And the individual's identity is not a cohesive whole, but instead fragmented and incomplete.

Accordingly, in what follows, I first discuss the method I employed, my relationship with Shahir, and how the research project came about, and offer background on the situation of workers in Malaysia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I then provide data that does not seek to synthesize a young Malaysian man's life into a coherent unity, but instead, portrays the conflict and tensions that exist for him in a globalized world.

#### On Method and Malaysia

In the winter and spring of 2008 I was on sabbatical in Malaysia. The university that had offered me the position of Scholar in Residence had made several arrangements for me – housing, an office, a modest stipend, and a car and driver. I had never had someone drive me around before, and my first interactions with Shahir were as awkward for me as they were for him. His work had largely been confined to driving other Malaysians to meetings and conference and now he was to be with a foreigner. For the first two days other people were in the car with us and he did not speak at all.

“I asked Shahir if he speaks English,” a colleague explained to me when we checked into my apartment on the first day. She laughed, “He says he speaks a little, but you have to speak slowly.” Over the next few days we engaged in minimal greetings and began conversations that continued for the next 13 weeks.

Any research encounter is fraught with personal and power dynamics; my interactions with Shahir were no exception. He was my official driver, and as I came to learn, he earned overtime if I asked him to drive me somewhere in the evening or on weekends. Although we

grew closer over time, there was never any question about our relationship. We were not friends. As he said, “No, prof. Not right. You are prof. I am driver.”

In Malaysia the use of the term “prof” is an honorific that goes with anyone who is a full professor. In any meeting I ever attended no one ever referred to one’s colleagues without first using the term “prof.” My friends and I may have called one another by some version of our given names when we were at a social event, but even email exchanges always began formally: “Dear Prof...”

Other differences between Shahir and me – age, education, culture, religion – certainly helped frame our relationship, but one is remiss to think that if a life historian did not have such differences then the data developed are necessarily truer, better, more valid or reliable. The data will be different. As I discussed above, the new life history has to take into account the interaction and relationship of the life historian with his or her research subject and the context in which the data derive.

I was in Malaysia at a point in time where the potential for upheaval and turmoil was prevalent. A national election was to be held and the ruling coalition throughout the 50 year history of the country was about to lose its two-thirds majority, and perhaps the ability to rule. An individual who had been imprisoned, Anwar Ibrahim, was poised to unite the opposition parties and perhaps assume power. At the same time, Islamic fundamentalism had gained a toehold in the country, and different religious leaders condemned what they saw as Western values being imposed on Malaysia.

**One point of globalization is that changes are inter-related such that something that takes place in one country impacts another.** During those same months the United States started to slide into recession and the impact was felt in Malaysia. The cost of petrol rose. A run

on cooking oil and rice occurred when rumors began about possible shortages. Although the government maintained strict control over the print media and television, they were unable to censor the blogs that had started on websites. The corruption of the government and how various individuals in previous and present administrations had become wealthy was a heated topic of conversation. One of the ministers in the government had been videotaped having sex with a woman who was not his wife, further angering members of the Islamic party; another individual was found guilty of having made deals with judges that made him rich, only offering more evidence that the government needed to be changed, and perhaps, that society was spinning out of control.

Malaysia is close to a full employment economy, largely because of government created jobs and the low pay scale for those on the bottom rungs, of whom Shahir was one. Malaysia has made significant advancements since independence in 1957. Health care has improved, and the average life expectancy has risen. All children must attend school. The number of individuals attending a postsecondary institution has grown from slightly over 150,000 in 1985 to slightly over 700,000 in 2007. Roads are largely paved throughout the country, and trains and airplanes are prevalent. Over 17% of households own televisions, and 25% of families have cars.

Much of the significant advancement in the country, however, is tenuous. No minimum wage exists; the result is that private employers are able to hire many individuals. The public sector employs a significant number of individuals at very low wages. Costs also are extremely low for food and clothing. Shahir owned over 20 shirts that he wore to work, but none cost more than three dollars. A good lunch or dinner could be bought for two dollars.

About 10 million individuals are between the ages of 15 and 34 and account for slightly over 40% of the population (Doraisamy, 2008). That part of the population has increased about 2% a year since 1990. Although a significant number are not employed because they are in school or cannot find work, the young are also the largest part of the labour force in the country. The government reports that unemployment is less than 3%. Because the young are new to the labour force they earn the lowest wages and they are likely to live at home. The lowest 40% of households earn the equivalent of about \$300 dollars per month. The next 40% of the economy earns approximately \$800 per month. As Sivam Doraisamy (2008) has observed, “Most workers have to sacrifice their rest hours and leisure, as they need more money to survive. Most workers do overtime and have second jobs ... It is common for workers to work 12 hours in a row” (p. 17). The result is that an overwhelming percentage of the population is making subsistence wages, but because costs are subsidized, they are gradually able to earn a slightly better living. The improvement in one’s material life, however, is based on political, economic and social stability.

What has most threatened the social fabric of the country is the cultural and religious make-up of the citizens. About 52% of Malaysia is populated by Malays, the overwhelming percentage of who are Muslim. Another 25% are Chinese and Buddhist and the remainder are Indian and Hindu, with a small indigenous and Catholic population. Although class differences cut across all three ethnic groups, no **significant** class-based party currently **has ever existed** in Malaysia. Instead, political parties have formed around ethnic and religious identity, and some of these parties have come together to form the ruling coalition.

Before I arrived a new Indian rights party had been created and a large demonstration had occurred that resulted in the arrest of the party leaders; they were protesting that Indians were not

being treated as second class citizens, and that those Indian leaders who were part of the ruling coalition had sold out by not being more vocal on behalf of Indians and instead focusing on personal gain. Eventually, the majority of the Indian population deserted the Indian party of the ruling coalition and its leader was turned out of office after a generation. The Chinese also deserted the Chinese parties of the ruling coalition and new parties came to power in several states that were part of a new multi-ethnic coalition.

The constitution states that the country is Islamic, but respects all religions. In 1971, a law was passed that sought to reverse Chinese economic and social predominance and instead promoted a form of affirmative action for a majority of the population, the ethnic Malays. For over 30 years Malays have been able to gain low interest loans that facilitate buying a house, for example, and children have been promised spots in the best schools and in the public universities. The result is that Chinese and Indian schools have been created that many criticize as second class, and those who can afford to send their children abroad for university or to attend a private university have done so at significant expense to the family.

The Malaysian language – bahasa – has been promoted. Originally the government emphasized English language instruction, and then reversed itself and promoted bahasa as a way to unite the country. Now the government is swinging back toward teaching English. Chinese and Indians do not speak bahasa at home, but most are able to converse on the street with some level of proficiency. Educated Chinese, Indians, and Malays speak English. In formal meetings a mixture of bahasa and English is likely to occur. The use of bahasa as the national language has had many effects, one of which is that it disadvantaged Chinese and Indian Malaysians from gaining government jobs.

What seem like trivial differences based on religion, often loom quite large across the three groups. Muslim food must be 'halal,' cooked in a manner that aligns with Islamic codes (e.g. not have come into contact with pork), so the simple act of eating a meal can be delicate. If a Muslim Malay falls in love with an Indian or Chinese person, then the non-believer must convert to Islam if they are to get married. Such differences have had multiple effects on society for over 50 years. The threat that the country will dissolve into ethnic violence is always present; many express concern that Malaysia might become a 21<sup>st</sup> century Yugoslavia. There is a precedent. In May, 1969 after an election where Chinese and Indians made gains, there was rioting in the capital and throughout the countryside where people died. The emphasis on cultural difference and national unity also has prevented any class-based parties from gaining prominence, until recently. The result is that some individuals have made significant earnings and most citizens have made what they think of as significant advances – from no running water or electricity in Shahir's parents' time, to flush toilets, warm showers, and 24-hour electricity today.

When I approached Shahir about doing a life history he was not initially clear about what a life history was. "I will ask you questions, and you will answer them," I said. "Anything you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer." He nodded, and returned to what I had mentioned to him earlier: "And you will pay me, no matter what I say? Whether I give good or bad answers?" I assured him that he could not give me bad answers; I wanted whatever he thought. He paused and smiled, "But, prof, you'll pay me? I get money for this?" I nodded yes and over the next three months we spoke informally whenever I was in the car with him, or we stopped somewhere for lunch or coffee, and we had formal interviews that took place two hours

a week, usually on late Friday afternoons after he had attended mosque. I also visited his family's apartment and spoke with his mother and father.

As I elaborate on below, Shahir lived by a rigorous moral code. Although he needed extra money, if I had asked him to do something that he considered unethical – such as eat at a non-halal restaurant – he would have refused. A life history, however, was, as he said once, ‘like you are asking me to explain to you what I think important.’ In what follows I divide the commentary into three overlapping themes that we returned to whenever we met: work, religion, and identity. All of these themes offer insight about what it means to be a young working class Muslim male in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century during a time of intense globalization.

### *Shahir on Work*

At the end of every day as I return to my apartment Shahir asks me what time he is to meet me the next day and where I need to go. For the entire time that we are together he is never late and never gets lost. He has set the car clock as well as his watch ten minutes fast and explains to me:

“Before I got this job I practiced being on time. I want to be reliable, professional. I study the streets where I need to take you, what time a street is busy, busy and when not. I take work seriously. Some people are not serious; they are lazy, show up late or come when want. Don't dress professional. Not right. I follow through and know what means to be serious.”

One day he lets me off for a meeting that is supposed to take an hour and the interview I have extends to over two hours. When I finally return to the car Shahir is waiting for me and I apologize for making him wait.

“Not a problem, prof,” he says.

“But I shouldn't make you wait. You don't make me wait.”

“Different, prof. I’m the driver. I have to wait. My job. My time is your time.”

“But it’s hot out here. I should have called you.”

He smiles, “If you want prof. Your decision, prof.”

I ask him later if there are differences between the people he has driven around, if some are better than others, and he says, “Not different, no.”

“But if I have a friend come here and he asks how to behave with a driver, what should I tell him?”

“Oh, he needs to respect me. Treat me professional.”

“What’s that mean?”

“He shouldn’t smoke in my car, make a mess, shout at me, treat me like I do not know my job.”

A week or two later we are returning to my apartment and I tell him to turn down a street and it turns out it is a dead end. “I shouldn’t have told you to turn down here. You knew it was a dead end, why didn’t you tell me. I made a mistake.”

“It’s ok, prof. Next time we will not go down it.”

Shahir sees work as a series of stepping stones. When he finished school he worked in a store for a few months and then got a job at a private club. He went from busboy to waiter to bartender to maitre de within the space of a year and then left. “Not good for me, prof. Making drinks. I make a good Margarita, but not good, as a Muslim, to see people drinking. And when he gave me a promotion I got no more money. More stress, same money. I left. Worked in a hospital.”

The hospital gave him no raise either and he had a friend who had a friend who got him a temporary job at the university, and then he applied for his current job. He likes the people and

the job provides security if he can hold onto it for three years and gain the equivalent of tenure. He will get health benefits, job security and a pension when he retires.

“But still not enough money, prof. I must find another job.”

Throughout my time in Malaysia the individuals who meet Shahir comment on how courteous and responsible he is. As he has said, not all of his friends and co-workers takes work as seriously as he does. I also call on him to do tasks that I am unable to do either because I do not speak bahasa or I am culturally inept. He introduces me when I meet a number of relatively important academics and administrators, and on occasion, translates for me in order to process a bank check, or explain the sort of data that I need. He helps me bargain for a DVD player, among other personal tasks, and then sets it up for me after I blow a fuse and short out my apartment.

“I wonder what I would do without you, Shahir. You’re much more than a driver.”

He smiles, “But prof, I am just a driver. Really, prof.”

I recount how he has facilitated a variety of sensitive interactions, and that I could not have done it without him, that he is good with people and he should try to do something with his skill.

He laughs, “I was nervous with Professor X. Not sure if I use good language.”

“You were perfect,” I say.

“I try. To be good at work you must try. Not just do the same every day.”

When I suggest that he should either get his high school degree or go back to school so that he might do something in tourism because he is good with people and speaks English, he nods in a way that I know means he will not do it. I ask him why and he says, “Maybe someday prof, but I need money now. My salary is small, small. I work hard, but save not enough.

20,000 ringgat for marriage, prof. What can do? I want a house, a car, but not possible. My major worry, prof. I very tense, I think much about it, a wife, my parents are old. Children, someday. Not easy, prof, not easy.”

*Shahir on Religion*

Every Friday after mosque I ask him what the talk was about and what he thinks. One Friday he says, “He spoke about how the man has to be a good husband, that he cannot just sit around and not do anything. That he should help his wife in the house, be good, respect her.”

Another time he notes that the Imam spoke about the importance of Muslims sticking together. “Very sad, prof. All the war, killing, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Muslims need to be united. We are not.”

Before the elections the Islamic party controlled one state in Malaysia and they made a proposal that in grocery stores there should be separate check-out lines for men and women. Shahir thinks that is a good idea: “We must protect our women. Keep them from violence, from rape, from bad things. The Koran teaches us to respect women.”

“But a grocery store? Is it dangerous in a grocery store?” I ask.

“Yes. Yes,” he responds immediately. “Whenever we can protect women we must. Not like America.”

**“But protect from who, Shahir?”**

**“Men.”**

**“All men?”**

**“Well, not all men, but bad men. There are many bad men.”**

**I ask him if he means men who are not Muslims, or men who are not Malay and he shakes his head: “Men. Some Muslims are bad, some Chinese, some Hindu. And Americans. Men have temptations. We must protect women. Always.”**

We talk about protection and how in Afghanistan under the Taliban a woman wore a burka and stayed at home. “That is different. Not what Islam says. A woman must not dress sexy, sexy, but the burka is not necessary. Hijab [a scarf to cover the hair], yes. It shows respect.”

I ask him if his wife will wear a hijab and what he is looking for in a wife, if looks matter. He shakes his head no, “A girl’s character is important. Looks are not. Of course she will wear hijab, be a good Muslim.”

“Will she work?”

“She must. I cannot make enough money for a family. She must.”

He is reticent to speak about sex, but says one day, “Marriage is forever. Sex is with your wife, not someone else. I know men who go to women. That’s bad. Against Islam. Harum [a sin]. The Imam says men who go to prostitutes, whores, are bad men. I will not.”

I say that I understand what he thinks is a bad man, but what is a good man?

“He prays five times a day. Fasts during Ramadan. Goes to mosque. Respects his wife and is a good husband. Provides for his children. Doesn’t drink, do drugs.”

“Smokes cigarettes” I ask, and he laughs. I know he smokes and he is embarrassed by it.

“Not harum, prof. But bad,” he acknowledges, “I am not perfect. I will try to stop, but cannot.”

One day we see two young American women walking down the street and they wear tank tops, shorts and sandals. He stares at them and I ask what he thinks.

“Too much. Too sexy, sexy. Not right. Not good.”

“But you look at them.”

He laughs, “Prof, I can look! But not good.”

He reads the Koran daily, but most of his knowledge of it derives from his attendance at mosque and listening to imams on the radio and television. He is very clear about the rules that a good Muslim must follow, but less clear about why the rules exist.

“Pork is harum,” he says one day, explaining why he will not go with me to a Chinese restaurant that serves pork and chicken.

“I wonder why it is harum.”

“It is pork, harum.”

“But why is it harum?”

He sighs as if I do not understand, as he did a few weeks later when we spoke about tattoos, which also are harum.

“No, I never get a tattoo. Bad. Harum. The Koran says not to get tattoos.”

“Shahir, there’s not really a sentence in the Koran that says ‘don’t get tattoos’ is there? Really?”

“It’s harum.”

“Why? Why do you think getting a tattoo is bad?”

“The Koran says so.”

“Why does it say so?”

He expressed frustration and concludes, “You need to ask the Imam. It is harum.”

**Later I ask him about the Imam, what he is like.**

**“He is a good man, like a holy man. You go to him when in trouble, when you have questions, like when you don’t know an answer, or need an answer. More important than politician, than Pak Lah [the prime minister.] He teaches how to follow Islam.”**

I ask him one day if politics and Islam are interconnected, if when someone acts bad or is dishonest if it is harum and he makes a differentiation:

“It is bad, but maybe not harum. The man who went to a prostitute – harum. But someone who is not a good man, maybe he’s just a bad man but does not do harum things.”

“But doesn’t politics get influenced by Islam?”

“Of course. We must respect other religions, like the Chinese or the Hindu. We let them have their festivals, Chinese New Year, Thaipusam [a Hindu religious day]. Islam says we should, we must. We must respect other religions. And if a politician says we must jihad and they say it in the mosque, then we must.”

“What if a politician says to jihad, but not the imams?”

“Then listen to the imams. Jihad is Islam. Politicians do other things, like the economy.”

“Isn’t the economy also about Islam?”

“Some. We must help the poor.”

“Do you think people are rich because they are good Muslims?”

“No. Some people are bad people and rich. The rich and Islam are different. If I have a small, small salary I can be a very good Muslim, and a man with a big, big salary can be a bad Muslim. Not the same. A good person follows Islam, a bad person does not.”

### *Shahir on Identity*

Shahir weighs about 110 pounds and is less than five feet six inches tall. He wears three silver rings and a watch on his left hand; he has a bracelet on his right hand. He has dark skin,

the faintest of mustaches and gets his hair cut once a month in a different style for two dollars. He is very careful about his appearance. Every day at work he shows up wearing an ironed shirt and pants; on weekends he dresses more casually, often in a t-shirt, jeans and sandals. He would not stand out if he were in a mall in California on a weekend. He has a cell phone that he keeps attached to his belt, and an earpiece that allows him to listen to the radio as he drives.

He has had what he calls “bad luck” with girls, although luck is a concept inimical to Islam. He dated someone for three years who he wanted to marry and then one day she simply stopped speaking to him. Because it is incumbent upon a man to marry and have children, he has dated several women since then, but none are “special” as he says. He still wonders why she vanished.

“Maybe because I am not handsome, or I am shy, quiet, or haven’t a car, or not rich. I don’t know.”

He worries a great deal about his slender physique and has learned to laugh about it, but also thinks that he has particular weaknesses that make his life that much harder.

“I thought about joining the army. But me carrying a rifle. The rifle is bigger than me,” he jokes one day, but on another day he says, “My [older] brothers are big, strong. They also have light skin.” When I say that makes no difference he nods and echoes what his mother tells him, “I am special, yes.” He pauses and continues, “But perhaps girls are not interested, that I am too small, too dark, not funny and noisy.”

He continues on a subsequent day on the same theme, “I have many worries. I try to gain weight, but cannot. I am small, small, but that is me. Not enough money. Not good-looking like Munir [someone who works with him], just a motorcycle, no car.”

“But you are a good Muslim. You work hard. You are serious,” I say.

He nods and smiles, “Yes, that is what is important. But it is still hard.”

On another day we go to a travel agency so I can change my airplane ticket and as I work with a young woman who works for Malaysian Airlines he waits outside. When I come out he says to me, “She is very beautiful,” nodding to the woman who helped me.

I nod and say, “Should I introduce you? Do you want to meet her?” He explodes in laughter, “Cannot, prof, cannot. She has a good job, lot of money, more than me. A professional. Very smart. But she is very beautiful.”

On the way back to the office I ask him why he could not date someone like her and he says succinctly, “Too different.”

When I say that she might be a good Muslim, he shakes his head, “Yes, might be. But too professional. Not interested in a driver.”

He mentions a young woman who works in the office and has a master’s degree and is single. “She not interested in someone like me. She wants a doctorate, wants to be a prof. Not possible for me. To live with me in my parents’ house, she not do, not do.”

Shahir lives at home in a two room apartment with his parents. The home is modest, but certainly not a slum. They have electricity, running water, a bathroom and shower. The television has a DVD player and although there is a great deal of noise from the other tenants the building feels like what it is – a noisy working class neighborhood with lots of children.

“Someday I will move,” he explains, “but not now. My parents are old, and an apartment with roommates is expensive.”

He goes on to explain precisely how much an apartment with two other roommates will cost and how much he will spend and not save. “And why do that? To live without my family,

to live with roommates, so you can do silly things, not good things,” by which he means having girls over to the apartment.

“But to marry and live with parents, not good. First dowry, then apartment, then car,” he says resignedly.

“And children,” I add and he nods.

“Many responsibilities, prof. Many responsibilities.”

Although he always will say that Islam is paramount and that is the most important part of his life, on multiple occasions he will say something akin to what he tells me on the day his father has a motorcycle accident:

“Money is everything, prof. Everything. Without it you can do nothing. I do not know what to do. Petrol increased for my cycle. My father, we go to the doctor, and he must have medicine. I buy, but less for wedding, for car, for future.”

On another morning I get into the car and he is dressed entirely in black. I laugh and explain to him the meaning of mourning, that in America we wear black when something bad has happened.

He nods and says quietly, “Then I mourning, prof. Last night I go home. Park my cycle. Go to my apartment and later go out for dinner. No key. I lose my key to my cycle. I look everywhere. No key. I mourning prof.”

He is close to tears as he tells me about his motorcycle and that if he cannot find the key he will need to buy a new starter, which will cost the equivalent of about a third of his monthly salary. He is not only despondent about having to spend the money, but that it was his mistake that has caused the problem.

“I not responsible, prof. Very bad. My mistake and look what happens. I will never marry. Money is everything and this not good, prof.”

He never finds the key and has to buy a new starter. Two weeks later I notice that one of the rings on his finger is missing. He laughs.

“I lost it. But I not mourning, prof. Cheap, cheap ring, not silver. But not good. I think I am not concentrating.”

The following week I absentmindedly leave my headphones on the airplane. We have to go to the airport to retrieve them and I say that I am forgetful, like him, with his key, with his ring.

He smiles and says, “Not the same, prof. You are a prof. If you lose headphones, you buy new ones. If I lose headphones ...” He shrugs and looks out the window.

He continues, “The rich get a break. Professional. For me very difficult. Petrol goes up, what to do? Take the bus? Young people who are rich, the children, very easy for them. I go to mall, and they buy ice cream, walk around in expensive clothes, buy television, go to movies. For me, different. Bargain movies night. Wait for sales for television. This shirt, on sale. One dollar. You think the rich look for sale? Buy a shirt like this? No. My children, someday, they must study hard. I did not, did not understand. Now look. Yeah, prof? It’s difficult, prof. I try prof. I try. But very difficult. What can do, prof? What can do?”

#### Putting the Fragments Together

What do these fragments of one person’s life at one point in time have to say about life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And for the purposes of this paper, what does Shahir’s life history say that might be different from his father if he had been interviewed 50 years ago? Before I answer these questions it is helpful to recall that life history does not seek to generalize across all people

or even across one people, **and the stance adopted here is less to present a pre-determined text that has one meaning, but instead hopefully enable interpretations on the part of the readers.** As I discussed at the outset, the new life history also eschews an investigative framework that pursues a portal approach whereby questions are asked that lead to responses that enables individuals an entryway into someone's life, and of consequence, the people he or she represents.

Instead, I have focused this text on the processes involved in living a life. Shahir lives his life, obviously, from moment to moment, day by day. Different events call upon different interpretations based on his past, and what I have tried to understand are those processes. I employed a narrative framework that inserted my own voice in the text because the nature of the questions I asked, and frequently how he responded to me, incorporated his perception of who I was. Presumably, a Muslim would not have asked the basic sorts of religious questions that I asked him to answer. He likely would have responded differently to a woman than to a man and his need to translate my questions from English to bahasa and back to English undoubtedly were different from if we had conducted all our interviews in bahasa.

My use of the word "different" is purposeful. The need to ask basic questions about Shahir's thoughts pertaining to Islam enabled me to come to grips with his inner beliefs in a manner that may not have been possible if the focus had been on more in-depth and nuanced understandings of Islam. Conversely, such questions would have created different understandings of how Shahir constructed his life. Shahir was fluent enough in English to make himself well understood, but perhaps a more free-flowing conversation in his native language would have lent different understandings as well. Yet part of how we interacted depended on us making ourselves understood to one another. I also did not simply ask questions of him such that

I was the interviewer and he the interviewee. I not only paid him for his work, I also occasionally supported him when he needed something, and I offered advice to him, even when it was not taken. As seen, he had a philosophical framework on which he lived his life and our discussions were more like a conversation than a one-sided interview.

The points I raise here have little to do with good or bad method. The arguments that erupted over Margaret Mead's work focused in part on her inability to understand what people were saying (Freeman, 1983). And too, a simplistic version of objectivity whereby an interviewer does not proffer opinions about a particular point overlooks that all interviews are human interactions that depend on some sort of connection between interviewer and interviewee. Shahir was less interested in my opinion about whether there should be separate grocery store lanes for men and women than in helping me understand what he believed. He was, however, particularly interested in whether I preferred thin or flat noodles, spicy or mild curry, the differences in cars between the United States and Malaysia and whether I thought a woman or a Black man could be elected president of the United States. The result was a dialogical interaction that evoked responses from Shahir about the challenges he faces as young Malaysian male.

Just as data that derive from a postmodern framework have a relationship to modernism, so too do data taken from a process approach to life history and globalization have relationships to previous understandings of individuals. I have long thought it foolish to think that simply by asking a series of questions utilizing a different framework one is going to develop an entirely different perspective from what has occurred in the past. We ought not to expect that Shahir's life is entirely different from that of his father's. The struggle to make a living amongst the working poor has always been difficult. How one made that living – as a janitor in a public

works building in Shahir's father case and as a driver in Shahir's situation – may differ a bit, but the context that surrounds their day to day work has many similarities. Although Islam may be more important to Shahir than it was to his father, they both have had to struggle with the responsibility of the male to find money for a dowry and the like.

On one level, Shahir's comments simply point to a life lived irrespective of context. But such an interpretation is inadequate and incomplete. Globalization speeds up change and alters work conditions. Think of the number of jobs he has held – and left – all before he is 25 because of the changing labor market. I pointed out earlier that in a developing country such as Malaysia where few worker protections exist such as the minimum wage or a 40 hour work week, perhaps as much as 25% of the workforce has low-wage jobs that demand minimal skills and pay subsistence wages. However, for Malaysia to continue to improve economically these sorts of jobs will evaporate as they have done in other parts of the world that have ascended the economic ladder; **again, a consequence of globalization.** The result is that Shahir faces an unsteady and unclear future in a manner very different from his father. If a man such as his father stayed healthy, then he expected to live a life not very different from the one that Shahir's father actually lived. He earned a steady salary that enabled him to rent an apartment, provide for his children, and gain a modest pension. As these jobs are eliminated, however, Shahir will need skills that he does not have, and he has not considered gaining. His focus is to improve his life on a daily basis based on a set view of the world. Although re-tooling and re-skilling are certainly possible for someone with Shahir's capability and determination they are less certain as he grows older, and at a minimum, remarkably different from the skill set his father needed for all of his adult life. **Such is what takes place in a globalized economy.**

If the economy stalls because of political or social turmoil Shahir's life will yet again be quite different from that of his father's. His father's world-view extended largely to the geographic borders of town. He had little need for DVD's, CD's, American cars, or foreign watches because he did not know they existed. Shahir's peer group, however, is entirely different; their world-view is not framed by a geographic cartography but instead is determined by communicative technologies that have no geographic borders. Even for someone like Shahir who is not simply in pursuit of fancy goods, the accumulation of wealth matters. He wants to go on the Haj someday, which will cost thousands of dollars. He wants to get married, and the dowry includes how much he will spend on his honeymoon. I showed him a picture from a Malaysian magazine that advertised the "honeymoon deluxe" at an Indonesian resort replete with a fancy swimming pool at the hotel and a private Jacuzzi in each room. He laughed, "Yes, that is what I want. Must have, prof." His goals have changed because of the influx of information from beyond Malaysia.

The lives of the poor are always unstable. They are one paycheck away from economic difficulty. However, what I am suggesting is that Shahir's life is unstable in a manner quite different from his father's **because of globalization**. In part, Shahir has learned how to deal with this instability through his reliance on his faith. Throughout history individuals have relied on their faith to make sense of the world, but this world is different from previous ones. Hence, the interpretations Shahir provides to it are different. Previous generations in Malaysia did not have to make sense of women wearing tank tops in their streets or websites that provided pornographic imagery with a click of the cursor. Men have always visited prostitutes, but Shahir is now faced with decisions on a daily basis about whether something violates his principles; the way he has developed an answer about what to do in large part depends on the interpretations he

provides about his religion. Although he has not yet made the connection between his own economic exploitation and politics, he is able to talk about how Muslims need to be united around the world because his brothers and sisters are being exploited by the very same societies that import sexual imagery to his country, or permit non-hallal foods to be mixed in with hallal foods.

Just as faith always has played a role in society, so too can one say that issues such as body image and whether one is perceived as handsome has long been of concern to young people. Again, Shahir's sense of identity is shaped by way of globalization. **Shahir's work ethic – being on time, dressing professionally, and the like – is in part shaped by Eurocentric customs.** The point is not simply that he wears jeans or chooses hair styles from international magazines for his monthly haircut. His identity is being shaped in ways unknown to a previous generation. Whereas Malaysians may have once said foreigners lived one way and they live another, the constant cultural and economic bombardment leads to questions about what is beautiful, what is desirable, what is success, and of consequence: who am I? Shahir has had his heart broken as men have had their hearts broken throughout time, but he interprets the reasons for his girlfriend breaking up with him **similar to, but also** in a manner different from past generations. **He worries that he is not handsome, for example, as men from previous eras have worried; but globalization also suggests different forms of relations between men and women, and even different definitions of masculinity.**

He also has a unique identity. I am not suggesting that all young Malaysian men act in a similar manner. He prides himself on his devotion to Islam, and as he tries to make psychological sense of why his girlfriend has broken up with him, he also points out that he does

not care whether a girl is beautiful. Indeed, he would most likely be uncomfortable with a woman who dressed “sexy, sexy” or engaged in activities that were harum.

However certain Shahir is about how to live his life, he also acknowledges how much uncertainty surrounds him. When he loses his motorcycle key he is upset not simply because he has to spend time fixing his motorcycle, or that it will cost additional money, but that the loss of income makes his life that much more difficult, and that his own sense of who he is, a responsible adult male, has been brought into question – not by others, but by himself.

Ultimately, his challenge is to make sense of his life at a time when globalizing forces are cascading in upon him and raising questions that were not asked only a generation ago. I have used life history as a way to understand how he sees himself in a time fraught with change and ambiguity, **and by doing so, hopefully have shed light on how we might employ life history to understand how education is being changed by globalization.** I have argued that societal changes are in part framed by globalization and how Malaysia has reacted to pressures largely from outside its borders. The answer to how Malaysia should respond in order to aid the working class or what Shahir might do to provide greater stability in his own life, of course, defies a simplistic response, or as Shahir might say, “Not easy prof, not easy.”

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