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Culture of Poverty: Lessons from Two Case Studies of Poverty in the Philippines; One Became Rich, the Other One Stayed Poor

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Culture of Poverty: Lessons from Two Case Studies of Poverty in the Philippines; One Became Rich, the Other One Stayed Poor

Abstract

This article describes the lives of poverty in the context of a specific culture, the Philippines. The goal of this article is to study what it means to be poor and to understand the cultural factors that contribute to this human experience. Two case studies will be presented; one of a Filipino who was born poor and has become materially successful, and another of a Filipino who was born poor and has stayed poor. Interestingly, the two persons are relatively similar in terms of beginning circumstances, education, gender, religion, and age. The discussion will deal with the processes of living in poverty and getting out of poverty. The results will then be discussed in a broader framework of culture and poverty, and intercultural differences between Philippine poverty and the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1959) will be highlighted.

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Introduction

In the world today, socio-economic differences have stayed an important variable in comparing cultures and subcultures within a country. Although socio-economic differences have become manifest in different forms, the acknowledgment of this wide range of ownership of resources, and the efforts to balance the power bestowed by socio-economic levels have not ceased to be important. Half of the world, nearly 3 billion people, live on less than \$2 per day (Ramonet, 1998). And approximately 790 million people in the developing world are still chronically undernourished; with almost 2/3 of whom reside in Asia and the Pacific (Wood, Sebastian, & Scherr, 2001).

Knowing about social class contexts of people's lives, specifically of the poor, has consequences for the world especially to the world committed to social justice (Lott, 2002). Countries whose people have experienced abundance in opportunities and material success know little of the experiences of people in countries who live and die without owning anything of material value. Moreover, people in poor countries may lack hope and be ignorant of possible opportunities that may be natural and automatic in more affluent societies.

Few poor countries have been able to catch up with Western countries in terms of wealth or narrowing the divide between poor and rich (Emmott, 1999). To specify, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the poorest 48 nations (a quarter of the world's countries) is less than the wealth of the world's three richest people combined (Ramonet, 1998). This is a startling fact. Globally, poverty continues to present an important challenge, in as much as it is not understood nor is the suffering of poverty alleviated. Poverty research has already moved from dominant themes of dependency to "working poverty", where change lies with the political economy and culture that maintain economic inequality (O'Connor, 2000). If we want to work on a whole comprehensive psychological theory, then we cannot exclude the majority of the world population and their living circumstances.

In Lewis' (1959) ethnographic study of five poor Mexican families, he concluded that intergenerational poverty is characterized by a constant struggle for survival, socio-psychological traits including a lack of privacy, alcoholism, wife beating, violence in relationships, and values such as strong present time orientation, inability to defer gratification and plan for the future, resignation, and fatalism. This "culture of poverty" familiar to most, encourages thinking that poverty is due to cultural inadequacies of the poor and challenges the economic, political, and cultural barriers, and discrimination faced by the poor (Corcoran, 1995).

This chapter examines the life of two persons born and raised in circumstances of poverty in a Third World country, the Philippines. This is an emic study of poverty, i.e. "thick description" as defined by Clifford Geertz (1973), with a case study of one woman who was born poor and become economically successful and another case study of a woman who was born poor and has stayed in poor circumstances. It is hoped that this discussion will enlighten the readers and facilitate their ability to understand the difficulties many people endure in their efforts to escape poverty.

A Glimpse of the Philippines

In terms of history, the Philippines has had a significant experience of being colonized by powerful countries. It was ceded by Spain to the U.S. in 1898 following the Spanish-American War, after about 400 years of Spanish rule. Filipinos attained their independence in 1946 after being occupied by the Japanese (for about 4 years) in World War II and after being governed by the U.S. (for about 50 years). The 21-year rule of Ferdinand Marcos ended in 1986 when a widespread popular rebellion forced him into exile. The disempowerment, passivity, lack of initiative, and colonial mentality (Talisayon, 1990) in the Philippines is rooted in its long history of being under powerful regimes.

The Philippines is located in Southeastern Asia, and its archipelago is between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea. Its area is 300, 000 square kilometers (slightly larger than Arizona in the U.S.) and is comprised by 7,100 islands. Its climate is tropical, i.e., hot and humid, and it has rainy and dry seasons. Natural disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes and volcano eruptions frequently occur. Its population is 81, 159, 644 (July 2000 estimate) and its population growth rate is 2.07%. In its population, 37% is aged 0-14 years, 59% is 15-64 years of age, and 4% is 65 years and older. In terms of ethnicity, Christian Malay comprises 91.5% of the population, Muslim Malay is 4%, Chinese is 1.5%, and 3% comprises all others. In terms of religion, 83% are Roman Catholic, 9% are Protestant, 5% is Muslim, and 3% is Buddhist and other. The official languages are Pilipino (Tagalog) and English. There are 11 other languages and 87 dialects. The economy is a mixture of agricultural, light industrial, and supporting services. The unemployment rate is 9.6% (as of Oct 1998). Poverty incidence in the Philippines is 59% (Philippine Star, 2001), with a hunger incidence of 16% (having nothing to eat at least once in 3 months). Poverty threshold is P7, 000 (= \$140).

The "culture of poverty" in the Philippines is such that life is viewed as unfavorable, i.e., most have no aspirations and are unable to think of any. They hope that their children get educated and they rely much on chance or luck (Guerrero, 1973). The poor in the Philippines pervasively manifest a strong disillusionment with the social, economic, and political conditions in the country. Graft and corruption in government, unsolved judicial and legal cases, and very high crime rates all illustrate the bleak situation in the country. What allows for this poverty and exacerbates conditions is the Filipino's patience and tolerance for frustration, valuing smooth interpersonal relations, and religiosity (Ortigas, 1994). However, Ortigas (1994) also describes a growing anger, hostility, aggression, and criminality towards the elite.

Case Study of Mila: Rags to Riches

Note: For reasons of confidentiality, names and specific identifiable details are changed

Mila (48 years old currently) was born in the province of Pampanga in a town belonging to the northern island group of the country, Luzon. She is the second oldest of 9 children (5 brothers and 3 sisters). Her father had to serve in World War II, and started his own business of buying and selling. Her mother was a homemaker and took care of 9 children.

Mila's parents got married when they were teenagers, and began having their children with little consideration to future responsibilities, according to Mila.

Mila studied in a public elementary school that she described as a hut, with just a roof over their heads. She remembers going to school without sandals, as her family could not afford to buy her shoes, and growing up with only one set of clothes. In their small home they had no electricity. She and her brother had to gather firewood so their mother could cook for them. They ate rice and dried salted fish most of the time. While growing up, Mila sold vegetables. She earned money to help out at home because she witnessed her parents always arguing about money.

When Mila was 12 years old, she graduated from elementary school (grade 6). She told her mother she wanted to go to high school. Since her parents could not afford the cost of high school, her mother enrolled her in a beauty school instead. Although the beauty school required that students must be at least 16 years old to enroll, Mila entered at age 12. After 6 months, Mila had learned to do hair, make-up, manicure, and pedicure. Her mother immediately found a place for her to acquire experience and start earning. She worked for a family that owned a beauty parlor. She lived with them all week as their employee, and also cared for their household, including two children. While working, she attended high school in the evenings. One day of the weekend she visited her parents. Mila earned a salary of P30.00 a month (55 cents), which she mostly gave to her mother when she visited home. The money she gave her family helped to send her brother to tailoring school, and to finance her father's business. Mila also saved part of the money she earned for herself. In the beauty parlor, Mila read a lot, learned English, and was able to speak well. She was treated well by this family.

At the age of 18, Mila's future husband forced her to get married. He told her no one else could have her. He kidnapped her and after 10 days they got married. Mila said she did not know better, got pregnant, and eventually had four children. She did not like her life then, as her husband was not earning much driving a taxi. She decided to limit her family size to four by using birth control. Besides four children, Mila also supported 2 siblings (a brother and a sister) who did not finish school. Her parents asked her to care for them due to their poverty.

Mila was like a mother to her siblings. With their help, she was able to start a beauty parlor where her sister worked with her while her brother cared for Mila's children. Mila also sold food products, e.g. tocino (cured pork) to her customers to earn more money. While all this was happening, her husband was gambling, drinking alcohol, and womanizing. Her husband physically and sexually abused her.

Mila started questioning herself and decided that she did not want her life to remain as it was. Neither did she want her children to grow up with nothing. She realized that she hated her husband and hated herself staying with him. She recalled that social conventions did not help her when she went to a lawyer to file for separation. The lawyer said she could do nothing about her marriage since her husband did not want to leave her.

On her own, Mila sent her children to school and provided for their needs. To her, they were her priority. When things were bad with her husband, there were times when she felt worse and wanted to kill herself, but she stayed on. She finally told her husband

that she did not want him in her life, and that she could do better without him. Mila worked to get her husband employed in the Middle East, to get him away from her. After about a year and a half, he left to work as a driver in the Middle East. Her husband worked only for 2 years and then refused to work after that. He continued drinking alcohol excessively when he was back in the Philippines. With her husband's 2-year earnings and her savings, she was able to build a house for her children and siblings.

When her husband came back, Mila applied to work in another country in the Middle East, became employed, and left the Philippines. Her children were under the care of Mila's mother. Mila returned to visit them every 2 years and sent money to her husband every month for their care. She learned that her husband forced her mother out of the house and used the money she sent home for alcohol and womanizing. Mila came home to visit her children and arrange for their care without her husband's involvement. Her husband threatened to kill her, but Mila avoided him. Four to six months after one of Mila's visits to the Philippines, her husband died of a heart attack.

Some years passed, and Mila asked her friends who were in the U.S. to find her a pen pal who was a U.S. citizen. Eventually, the male pen pal visited the Philippines, they married, and Mila moved to the U.S. When she was in there, she petitioned for her children one by one. She got a license to work as a beautician in the U.S., and started her own beauty parlor. She sends money to her parents and visits the Philippines once in a while. She indicated there were times when she did not help her parents as much as they needed because she was also thinking of herself and her children. This angered her parents, but she lived with this.

Mila is very grateful that her husband treats her children well, is generous with her, and she has no problems with him. Mila cares for her husband since he is old and sickly. She is grateful to be free of the constraints of poverty, is able to see the world from the perspective of a happy person.

Case Study of Joy2: Rags to Rags

Note: For reasons of confidentiality, names and specific identifiable details are changed

Joy was born in the province of Camarines Norte, a province belonging to the northern island group of the country, Luzon. She is currently 49 years old. She is one of 8 children in her family (6 brothers and 1 sister, she is the 7th child). She recalls that life was not hard until her father, a musician, got sick, was paralyzed, and passed away. Joy was 9 years old when her father became ill. She realized her family had no money to buy the medications he needed. Joy's mother worked as a laundress. Joy sold food (corn and rice cake) to augment her mother's income. She remembered that her brother worked in the fields planting rice to help support the family. The family had a hand to mouth existence. Joy reported that the children were altogether in poverty and felt lucky their mother did not abandon them. Joy went to school until she was in her second year of high school. She indicated that her dream then was to finish school. However, she had to discontinue her education and go to work to help support the family.

Joy went to work in Manila as a maid for a year when her brother took her back to their home province. She married shortly after returning and lived with her husband in the home of his deceased parents. At 18 years of age, Joy had her first child, and proceeded to have more as the years passed. Her husband was a vendor and sold food items to provide for his family. When Joy and her husband had 5 children, they began a business of buying and selling crabs. They later expanded the business and transported seafood (crabs, shrimps, prawns) from the province to a market in Manila. They used a loan from Joy's friend to finance this enterprise.

The couple earned more money than they ever had, i.e., a profit of P1,000 (\$20) a day. Joy claimed that they had a wonderful life since they could provide for their needs. However, as they acquired money, Joy's husband started gambling and womanizing. He also physically abused her. Joy would leave him occasionally to teach him a lesson, but would come back after a few months. Joy forgave her husband and stayed with him for the sake of the children. They had five more children (10 in total) and her husband's drinking, womanizing and gambling continued. Joy's husband left the province when he could not pay his gambling debts. After 6 months, he returned and moved Joy and the children to Manila.

Joy claimed they had 10 children because this was God's plan for her. She tried to use birth control for a year, but this did not suit her. Joy provided for the children, but when the five eldest married and moved away, their financial help ceased. That left Joy with five youngsters to support including one who is mentally retarded. One child is in school and Joy hopes he will finish high school, get a good job, and help support the family. She encourages him to study and tells him not to let his friends influence him because he is her only hope. A sponsor provides for this child's education by giving money for school supplies, uniforms, and tuition.

Joy, her husband, and children live in a house owned by the cousin of Joy's husband in a squatter area in Manila. They do not have to pay rent and there is no electricity. Joy claims that she works hard to budget the money they earn to buy water and food. Sometimes they have food, and sometimes they do not. If there is any additional expense, e.g. her son's school project or if anyone gets sick with fever or colds, Joy would have to limit other expenses. When medication or care is needed, for example when Joy's husband had a stroke, the costs are well beyond Joy's means. The American sponsors who are providing for her child's education have offered support for other major needs.

Joy wakes up in the morning, cooks and cleans, then starts selling food at 3 in the afternoon and continues until one in the morning. Due to the effects of stroke, Joy's husband is no longer able to work. He once could fetch water or wash clothes, but that is no longer possible. Joy is the sole breadwinner, and needs help from her children to survive. Besides cooking and selling food items (banana cue, boiled bananas, and rice cake), Joy sells flowers and works as a laundress.

Joy feels her only hope of escaping poverty is based her one child's ability to finish school. She hopes he will become a waiter in a restaurant or work elsewhere to earn a regular salary. Her other children sell flowers. However, if the police catch them, as this is considered illegal, then they earn nothing. Joy claims that the children like working until

about midnight, when all their flowers are sold. Joy finds that her children can convince people to buy their flowers, and they sell more than she does.

Joy hopes her two younger children continue in school. She dreams that they finish high school and find employment as salespersons in a department store or take vocational courses such as cosmetology or dressmaking. Joy does not regret her life. She claims this is her destiny and her fate (inscribed on the palm of her hand). She says there is no need to regret the life given to her. She prays to God that she has a good ending to her life. She also prays that her daily chores are blessed, that she will earn enough money for her family, and that her children finish school. She has a strong fighting spirit.

Cultural Configurations, Differences, and Similarities

Both Mila and Joy lacked a high school diploma. Mila continued her education while she was working. Joy completed two years of high school. Both women were resourceful and hardworking. As Filipinos, they demonstrated traits of flexibility, adaptability, creativity, and industry (Talisayon, 1990).

Mila trained as a cosmetologist and sought to improve her skills. She also learned to speak English, practice reading, and saved her money. She was resourceful beyond her education, took risks by starting a business, building a house, and migrating to the U.S. She planned for her future.

Joy also used her skills to work and earn money, but she was confined to the ventures of selling food and doing laundry. She took limited risks and did not plan for the future. Her savings were used to provide for basic and unanticipated needs.

Early Marriages

Both Mila and Joy were married in their teens due to social and economic pressures. Mila was "threatened" by her husband, and Joy was forced to marry due to lack of alternative options. These circumstances are prevalent in the Philippines, a culture that is collectivistic and masculine in orientation. This is especially the case in communities with low education levels (Acuna & Rodriguez, 1996).

Number of Children

Mila had four children and then decided to have no more when she realized she would have to raise them on her own. Without consulting her husband, especially because he frequently raped her, Mila took birth control pills.

Joy believed her ten children were given to her by God, and she had no control over her fertility. Although religion is at the root of Filipino optimism and ability to handle life's hardships, it also instills an attitude of resignation (Andres, 1996). Joy was misinformed about the use of oral contraceptives and decided they were ineffective. She thought she had no choice about the number of children she had. Her children worked to help her provide for the family. Therefore, the more children she had, the more help she received. More children also increased the chance one or more might succeed educationally. This

speaks to the Filipino value of "pagmamay-ari", that children are considered wealth (Talisayon, 1990). Unfortunately, from this perspective, children are considered a means to escape poverty.

Hard Work

Both Mila and Joy are hardworking, and persevere in their efforts to provide for their children despite the difficulties they encounter. They both used skills they acquired as young girls and believed there is dignity in work, "kadakilaan ang paggawa", that benefits the family (Andres, 1996).

The difference between the women is that Mila, though limited in education, learned a specialized skill (cosmetology) that allowed her to earn a regular income, and to finance other business ventures and migration to the U.S. Joy was confined to using the same set of skills, e.g., cooking, selling food items, and washing laundry.

Caring for Family of Origin

Mila financially helped her family of origin, as soon as she started working. She provided money on a regular basis, until her children's needs increased, and it became clear that her parents and siblings relied on her contributions. On the other hand, Joy helped her family while she was staying with her mother and siblings, but ceased making contributions when she married. As Filipinos, Mila and Joy are committed to a strong family system and are highly indebted to their parents with an intense need to give back, "utang na loob" (Talisayon, 1990; Andres, 1996). Refusing to help the family results in a lot of guilt and shame or "hiya".

Valuing their Children's Education

Both Mila and Joy value education and hope their children will finish school. They attribute their lack of education due to the constraints on their family's finances. Despite their circumstances, they have high aspirations for their children.

Mila aspired to have all four of her children educated, and found resources to make this happen. She took this on as her responsibility. Joy, however, only encouraged one of her children to finish school even though there is help from sponsors. She identified her most conscientious child as a student. She allowed circumstances of poverty to dominate her life. In Joy's family, an education was the way to get a job and provide for the family. In this sense, education seems magical (Guerrero, 1973), i.e., the only solution to alleviate poverty. Joy regarded her children as people to help her eke out a living. She expected help from them more than providing for them.

Getting Away From Domestic Violence

Both Mila and Joy had abusive husbands who were involved in alcohol, gambling, and womanizing. They were physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive. This context

conforms to the culture of poverty described by Lewis (1959), and included the lack of privacy, alcoholism, filth, and violence. Mila and Joy shared the desire to leave their husbands but neither one succeeded in getting away from them. To the Filipino, family centeredness (Talisayon, 1990) carried to the extreme sometimes means tolerating abuse and letting go of your sense of honor. Since divorce or even separation is not widely accepted in the Philippines, one needs to use creative means and resourceful strategies to survive a bad marriage.

Mila tried another strategy in that she found an opportunity and worked hard to support her husband's departure to work in another country. He left for several years, returned, and then refused to leave. Mila left for another country to work. This got her away from her husband, and enabled her to support her children. Mila was very angry, and used this anger to leave her husband and focus on raising her children, even if it meant being on her own. She did not forgive her husband easily.

Joy, on the other hand, left her husband a couple of times, but she would either come back or took him back. Joy vacillated between being angry, to forgiveness, to tolerance, and to accepting the hurt. She came to a point where she lived with her husband as he was, and then took care of him when he had a stroke. Joy stayed on with her husband no matter what the consequences were. In the Philippines, it is not easy to leave one's husband. There are social norms and pressure that perpetuate "machismo" (having double standards) and "pagtitiis" (passivity and martyrdom). The strong masculine orientation, high collectivism, and high uncertainty avoidance (Acuna & Rodriguez, 1996) reinforce staying in marriages that may be unhealthy, unhappy, or even unsafe.

Dreams

Both Mila and Joy had intentions and dreams to get out of poverty. Mila left her husband, started her own business, and worked abroad. She remarried an American, started a business there, and petitioned her children to the U.S. She planned to change her circumstances and although it took a long time, she did this in small successive steps. She relied mostly on herself, which validates one of the strengths of the Filipino character, i.e., the ability to survive (Talisayon, 1990).

Joy's dream is to get out of poverty through one of her children. She hopes one child will finish high school and get a regular paying job. She has no other aspirations nor alternative means to achieve her goal. Joy illustrates what Guerrero (1973) portrayed as a deprivation of dreams. Joy relies on another person, her son, as a source of hope.

Help From Others, Suwerte

To Mila, it was luck that her mother encouraged her to prepare for a vocation that could produce a good income. She was also fortunate that her first employer trusted her to work and care for the family. Mila was treated well by them. Neither her family nor extended family helped her much. But her siblings whom she supported and cared for took care of her children. Mila attributes her husband's departure to find work as luck. It was also luck that she remarried a better man who loved her children.

Joy's first regular paying job was as a maid in a household. However, she stayed there only a year and did not return to a regular paying job. Joy's luck lies in the help of her relatives who took care of some of her children. To the Filipino whose upward mobility seems impossible, relying on luck or chance or "suwerte" (Guerrero, 1973), is a way of coping that assures hopefulness.

Reliance on God

Mila and Joy spoke a lot about relying on God. They prayed, and offered their intentions to get out of poverty. Mila however, while relying on God's help, relied on herself. She had help from others, but she never depended on this; she did things for herself. When she wanted to leave her husband, she developed a strategic plan. With Joy, however, she relied on God and asked to be taken out of poverty. The sense of agency and responsibility was not hers to have, but rather it was in God's hands. This illustrates the Filipino sense of "Bahala na" (letting go) that may be positively viewed as being available to God, being resilient, and having a sense of hope. It can also be viewed negatively as being fatalistic, resigned, tolerant, and over dependent on authority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these two case studies explicate factors that determine poverty and those that help eradicate it. Mila relied on herself, planned long term, took risks, used her resources and was courageous about trying new ventures and possibilities to make life better even when it meant being alone. Joy relied on others, specifically her children, accepted her situation as fate or destiny, planned short term, took minimal risks, used her resources, and constantly wished to escape poverty. The comparison of these two lives highlighted individual differences that led Mila to be financially successful and Joy to stay in an economically difficult situation. However, it would not be appropriate to view poverty solely from the perspective of individual characteristics. There are many societal factors that make it hard or nearly impossible to get out of poverty when one is born poor. These societal characteristics are easily identified in the descriptions of Mila and Joy's lives. In the Philippines, for the majority, there is no health insurance system, no unemployment support, no social security from the government, public education is not optimal or desirable, and there is no adequate protection from any kind of abuse. The reality of inadequate structural or governmental support leads to reliance on one's self, one's family, or one's God. This makes the process of getting out of poverty seem like catching a moonbeam with one's hand.

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Questions for Discussion

1. How would you describe poverty in your country? How does this compare to the rest of the world?

2. How do you feel about your poverty or privilege?
3. How would you design a study on poverty? How would you measure poverty? What would you like to know?
4. What cultural factors perpetuate poverty? What cultural characteristics make it possible to get out of poverty?
5. What cultural factors in the case studies resonate with your culture? Which don't resonate with your culture?
6. What economic, political, and government structures are at play in the rise of poverty in your country?
7. What are the implications of these findings to your understanding of poverty?