

## THE "CULTURE OF POVERTY" IN METRO MANILA: SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES

SYLVIA H. GUERRERO

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A sample of 200 respondents from three low-income neighborhoods in Metro Manila was interviewed in 1972 on background characteristics, perceived quality of life, aspirations, work orientation, views of the future, and social and political perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. The findings indicate minimal feelings of hopelessness and despair, together with great expectations for the next generation, particularly by means of higher education. Disillusionment about the state of the nation is offset by a sense of efficacy to produce change.

Concern for the poor is an age-old pursuit. More recent is the interest manifested by academicians and policy makers in gaining systematic knowledge of the poor and related social categories. This interest derives in part from the more encompassing 20th-century preoccupation with the phenomena of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and their accompanying social and ideological tensions.

A consequence of this academic interest in understanding the poor has been an outpouring of ethnographies, sociological surveys, and journalistic accounts of the poor and other similarly disadvantaged groups. There has been a proliferation of socio-anthropological labels and phrases such as "culture of poverty," "lower-class culture," "slum life," "drug culture," "low-income life styles," and "subculture of peasantry," coined to characterize these economically inferior groups.

In the United States, the "rediscovery" of poverty in the sixties and the ensuing "war on poverty" by the government have resulted in an enormous production of poverty literature marked by theoretical and frequently ideological debates over the disparate conceptions of and policy recommendations about poverty in the urban black ghettos.

There is on the one hand, what Herbert Gans (1968) identifies as the *situational view* of

poverty. It emphasizes structures and opportunities that affect the poor and prescribes that providing jobs and other resources will eliminate poverty. On the other hand, there are those who believe that the poor "have internalized behavioral norms that cause or perpetuate poverty," and would therefore need "services such as training and counseling for skills and ways of living that lead to cultural change."

Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966) describes this *cultural view* of poverty in his ethnographic studies of selected poor Mexican and Puerto Rican families. This "way of life handed down from generation to generation" is characterized by (1) economic traits such as a constant struggle for survival, and unemployment, and (2) socio-psychological traits composed of (a) behavioral patterns and relationships including lack of privacy, high incidence of alcoholism, wife beating, resorting to violence, and other similar pathological traits, and (b) values and attitudes such as "a strong present time orientation, with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation." Charles Valentine (1968) has done an excellent critique of this concept and suggests that the following question should be asked about it: "The master question must be, does the lower-class subsociety have a distin-

guishable subculture of its own?" More specifically, what elements are distinctive, what are shared with the dominant society, how are these perpetuated, how adaptive are these cultural configurations?

### *Problem and Methods*

In the Philippines we also note ambivalence and inconsistency in the various views on poverty. There is the romantic attitude toward rural poverty lyricized in a popular folksong, *Sa Kabukiran Walang Kalungkutan*, where happiness is said to characterize the poor countryside. At the other extreme, there are negative qualities commonly attributed to the poor: the passivity, traditionalism, and ignorance of the rural poor; the filth and criminality of the urban poor. There are also some who find positive qualities in the urban slums (Laquian 1968).

We cannot rule out the bias of theoretical orientation employed by the nonpoor or middle-class researchers. There is also the distinct possibility that we really do not have sufficient knowledge of the poor to be able to describe them beyond the usual impressions and stereotypes.

This paper will describe and analyze some sociopsychological characteristics of low-income people in selected slum areas in Metro Manila. No attempt is made to test the "culture of poverty" thesis; however, the study provides a preliminary basis for evaluating this conception of the poor.

Data for this study come from interviews with 200 respondents from three low-income neighborhoods in Metro Manila. More than two-thirds of the respondents are below 40 years of age, most have limited education (about 48 percent have had only elementary schooling), a low level of skill (52 percent hold service-oriented jobs), and are predominantly migrants from rural sectors. One-fourth of the respondents are unemployed. Of those employed, 34 percent are self-employed, that is, they create their own jobs. Incomes are very low, averaging ₱56 weekly. The average combined weekly income is ₱63.80 (about ₱3,000 a year). With an

average of 4.1 children per family, the income is, therefore, inadequate.

### *Findings*

#### *Satisfactions and Dissatisfactions*

How do our respondents rate their current situation? As expected, their overall assessment of life is unfavorable. More specifically, *one-fifth* described their situation as miserable. In more picturesque language they say *isang kahig*, *isang tuka*; *naghihikahos*; or *gipit na gipit*, to express their hand-to-mouth subsistence. One-third consider themselves "economically hard-up" while 16 percent place themselves in the "surviving" category. Altogether, more than two-thirds indicate their family situation as characterized by "a constant struggle to keep body and soul together." Still there are some 28 percent who are content with their socioeconomic status. Only one respondent considers his family better off than the rest.

To what extent is this assessment affected by comparing himself with others around him, presumably those poor like himself. Findings show a decrease in the respondent's feelings of deprivation when he uses his neighbors as a comparison group. Some 19 percent evaluate their situation as being worse than their neighbors, 50 percent as similar to their neighbors, and 30 percent as more favorable than their neighbors.

However, almost all agree that some people are in better economic circumstances than they. Thirty-nine percent see as better off those who have good and stable employment and 28 percent mention "those people with money." Other groups mentioned are those who have some education or own some property, i.e., landlords, those with political connections, and those who eat regularly and dress better.

#### *Aspirations*

Dissatisfaction results from a substantial discrepancy between expectation and attainment. The widespread discontent apparent in many developing countries today has been attributed to the "revolution of rising expectations." It is observed, for example, that it is precisely in regions experiencing some substantial develop-

ment that the political ferment is most prevalent. In a way, aspirations seem here to have outpaced attainments.

The level of aspirations one sets for himself also depends upon previous experience, which in turn influences his assessment of the probability of success or failure in an activity being considered. Where life is experienced as a constant struggle against forces perceived as being beyond one's personal control, what kinds of dreams are indulged in, what levels of reality or unreality are reached?

We questioned our respondents about their aspirations.

1. *What are their aspirations for themselves?* Almost two-thirds specify no aspirations and seem unable to think of any. This brings to mind Hoffer's (1963) speculation that "where people toil from sunrise to sunset for a bare living, they nurse no grievances and dream no dreams." Some 14 percent express material aspirations, such as "would like to own a house, appliances, and furniture," or "get rich"; seven percent would like "nothing but to educate our children," six percent want a better job; and 12 percent hope for physical and emotional well-being.

2. *What do they want for their children?* A majority (70 percent) indicate education as their most ardent desire for their children. This finding clearly supports the observation that education is highly valued in Philippine society and often seems to be the most significant avenue for social mobility.

3. *How much education do they wish for their children?* Of those who stated education as an aspiration for their children, more than half (56 percent) desire a college education for them — perhaps a very realistic assessment of the requirements of the job market.

On the likelihood of such aspirations being achieved, a clear majority are optimistic — 45 percent rate their chances as fair, 17 percent as very good. Only 15 percent rate their chances as poor. The rest are uncertain about these future prospects.

4. *What occupations do they desire for their children?* To many of these respondents (44 percent) any occupation is good enough. What

they want for their children is an occupation that would enable them to earn a living. Others, however, are more specific: 15 percent want a professional occupation for their children; seven percent aspire for clerical jobs for them; another seven percent would like them to be craftsmen. A few mentioned no desired occupation for their children.

Asked about the likelihood that their occupational aspirations for the children would be reached, the following response distribution was obtained: 54 percent feel they have a fair chance, 15 percent a very good chance, 14 percent a poor chance, and another 14 percent feel that their chances are contingent on certain factors.

#### *Work orientation*

We asked them what minimum amount of money would be needed for a happy life. Almost half (47 percent) say ₱51 to ₱100 a week, whereas one-third feel they need only ₱50 or even less (Table 1). It is quite interesting, but surprising, to note that only a handful mention amounts larger than their current weekly incomes.

What would they do if somebody gave them that amount? Among those who are currently unemployed ( $N = 84$ ), a majority (95 percent) say they would still look for employment, 50 percent affirm they would "strive harder" to look for a job, while a negligible two percent say they would no longer look for a job. For those currently employed ( $N = 116$ ), almost all (98 percent) say they would continue working, four percent would work less, 46 percent would carry on as before, and 48 percent would strive to work harder. This appears to indicate the high work orientation of these people — jobs mean perhaps more than just the monetary returns.

The frequency of buying sweepstakes tickets and betting on the numbers game (*jueteng*) and card games is used to indicate the degree to which respondents rely on chance, or luck. About half say they buy sweepstakes tickets quite frequently, about one-fourth gamble (16 percent of whom bet once or twice a week), but the majority (64 percent) seldom or never engage in any game of chance.

Table 1

*Low-income study respondents classified by the minimum weekly amount they feel a family needs to live comfortably (Metro Manila, January 1972)*

Amount	Respondents	Percent
P 50.00 or less	67	33.5
P 51.00 – P100.00	94	47.0
P101.00 – P150.00	19	9.5
P151.00 – P200.00	6	3.0
P201.00 – P250.00	1	0.5
P251.00 – P300.00	1	0.5
P301.00 or more	1	0.5
Don't know	11	5.5
Total	200	100.0

#### *View of the future*

Do the respondents expect future progress, granting that the conditions they face now remain the same? Almost one-half express optimism about the future, 27 percent are pessimistic, 13 percent are uncertain, and 11 percent say they just do not know.

Of those who are *optimistic*, 61 percent believe that as long as one keeps trying, one will find advancement. Others indicate more specific means: more jobs will be available in the future (14 percent), both husband and wife will be able to work (12 percent), children will then have completed their education (6 percent).

Of those who feel *pessimistic* about bettering themselves in the future, 44 percent cite the deteriorating economic conditions; others point out the scarcity of jobs, and still others feel that things are simply hopeless and miserable.

Those who are *uncertain* about the future mention various contingencies for success such as "if children complete their education," "if lucky," or "if given the chance."

Respondents feel a little more optimistic, however, about their children's future. Slightly more than half (52 percent) believe their children will have better opportunities than they themselves have, while only two percent indicate extreme pessimism; the rest are un-

certain: 18 percent say it depends and 28 percent say they just don't know.

In general, respondents feel that as long as one keeps trying one will succeed, that while there is life there is hope, and that man's success depends on himself to a large extent. The belief in one's ability to pull oneself up by the bootstraps is strongly held by this group: 54 percent agree with the statement that man's success depends entirely on himself, 26 percent think that it depends partly on the person himself, and only nine percent believe that success depends "somewhat on man himself."

#### *Social, economic, and political conditions*

Statements indicating orientation and positions on a number of social and political issues were presented to the low-income respondents who were asked whether or not they agreed with each item. The items deal with beliefs about the socioeconomic system, poverty, inequality, and injustice, as well as their feelings of efficacy and orientation to change.

A cursory examination of Table 2 reveals a strong endorsement of items that suggest disillusionment with the social, economic, and political conditions in the country. These include recognition of inequalities in wealth distribution and dispensation of justice, as well as feelings of powerlessness vis-a-vis the rich and

Table 2

*Responses of 200 low-income study respondents to social and political statements (Metro Manila, January 1972)*

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
1. If our economic system were just, there would be much less crime.	82.0%	6.0%	6.0%
2. Poverty is chiefly a result of injustice in the distribution of wealth.	64.0	13.5	22.5
3. Laws are often made for the benefit of small selfish groups so that a man cannot respect the law.	58.5	29.0	12.5
4. People like me can change the course of events in the country if we make ourselves heard.	87.5	3.5	9.0
5. Any man with ability and willingness to work hard has a good chance of being successful.	99.0	0.5	0.5
6. Almost anything can be fixed in court if you have enough money.	67.0	27.0	6.0
7. Educations is of no help in getting a job today.	26.5	67.5	6.0
8. Persons like myself have little chance of protecting our personal interests when they conflict with those of the rich and powerful.	65.0	20.0	15.0
9. Obligations to one's family are a great handicap to a young man today.	25.0	67.5	7.0
10. The world is run by the few people in power and there is not much the little guy can do about it.	62.5	23.0	14.5
11. People are contented with their present way of life and they do not want changes.	17.0	76.0	7.0
12. A community would get along better if each one would mind his own business and others take care of theirs.	61.0	34.5	4.5
13. Members of any community organization should be expected to attend only those meetings that affect them personally.	20.5	72.5	7.0
14. National development should be the concern of the leaders.	90.0	7.0	3.0

the politically dominant (see items 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10). These belief and attitude patterns are generally similar to those found in another survey using a nation-wide sample (De Jesus and Benitez 1970). Reflected in these responses is an increasing discontent over existing economic conditions and dissatisfaction with the manner in which government affairs are conducted, rather than the alienation allegedly arising from the social isolation of people in a growing mass society.

On the one hand, displeasure with existing conditions is expressed, and on the other hand there is an evidently strong positive orientation to change, belief in personal capabilities to effect change, and acceptance of the almost magical role of education in bringing about upward mobility for people like themselves. It is also important to underscore this study's finding that almost all subscribed to the idea that hard work and persistence are the keys to personal success.

The strong belief of the low-income respondents in the efficacy of the self in bringing about change in society is interesting though quite ironical, considering that their own situation contradicts their belief. The explanation may be found in part in the influence of Western educational values — which tend to stress the importance of individualism and hard work as keys to success — on local education.

There is also evidence of a high degree of reliance on national leaders, shown by the group's overwhelming adherence to the idea that national development is the major concern of leaders (90 percent).

The need for instituting change is further affirmed by two-thirds of the respondents. That this will be brought about peacefully is the consensus of the group: 94 percent are quite emphatic that peaceful means should be used to bring about change, while only four percent advocate violent means.

#### *Political attitudes and behavior*

The attitudes of the respondents appear to be consistent with their political behavior. Asked if they have ever joined demonstrations or strikes, 96 percent say they have not. Questioned

if they would participate in any such demonstrations or strikes, 77 percent answer "No"; only 11 percent give "Yes" as a reply, and 12 percent say "It depends."

Some of the reasons for noninvolvement in overt expressions of legitimate protest are the following (N = 50): 35 percent feel they are too busy to be interested in such activities, four percent perceive themselves as "peace-loving citizens." Of those who expressed a willingness to participate in demonstrations and strikes (N = 22), 14 percent feel that only a more active stance will bring hope for change, 50 percent see demonstrations as the only way of eliciting a government response to people's problems, and 32 percent say these are necessary for the cause.

#### *Conclusions*

Among the poor we studied, we find that in general there seem to be no feelings of hopelessness or despair. This is contrary to the assertion made by Lewis and others about the poverty culture in Western societies.

While our respondents express few aspirations for themselves, they remain very hopeful for their children. A college education is the most ardent desire for their children — and hopes for attaining this aspiration are high. In addition there is consensus about one's ability to pull oneself up by the bootstraps — what one needs is persistence to progress in life.

There is disillusionment with the economic, social, and political conditions in the country, but little sense of resignation or apathy. Instead, there is a sense of efficacy and power to change the course of events in peaceful or at least nonviolent ways.

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This paper was read at the National Convention of the Philippine Sociological Society, held January 20–21, 1973, at Bocobo Hall, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Q.C. It is based on a study of low-income neighborhoods in Metro Manila, conducted by the author while she was on the staff of the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila. Dr. Guerrero received the Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Wisconsin (1970) and is currently with the Institute of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines.

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