

# TEASING OF CHILDREN IN A RURAL PHILIPPINE VILLAGE<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to describe some of the ways in which children in a Philippine village are teased, and to suggest some of the functions of this teasing.

Child socialization in the Philippines has been discussed by many authors, but few have made reference to the practice of teasing. One sociologist who treats of this subject is Nurge (1965). Writing about a village in Leyte, she states (1965: 79):

Teasing is a mild form of verbal aggression which, however, may be delivered in a stinging and irritating manner. The Philippine village child must learn to submit to this social discipline with good grace and, indeed, to develop skill in it.

Nurge describes numerous examples of teasing as a form of aggression in the various dyadic relationships within the family. However, she notes that "only one teasing incident was reported from childhood" (1965:120).

Another treatment of the topic is by Guthrie and Jacobs (1966:157):

We found many forms of teasing prevalent not only in the child's world but in the adult world as well. Teasing serves many functions. It is a way to sound out how far one may go. If rebuffed one can counter with "I was only teasing . . ." All in all, teasing is a convenient instrument of social interaction which allows the expression of individual feelings within a group that places a premium on pleasantness in interpersonal relationships.

In this latter study, mothers interviewed claimed that about 80 per cent of their children tease a great deal, but that only three children (out of 297) reported they enjoyed being teased (1966: 157-58).

A third study pertinent to the subject, but less explicit about teasing, is that of the Nydeggers (1963). They describe a "playing" with younger children, where desired objects are withdrawn from the child to deliberately provoke him. They state (1963:822):

Whether this is an excuse for hostility on the part of adults or perceived in some way as helping the child learn to "take a kidding" we do not know, for no amount of probing could get past the "play" interpretation.

In the present study, probes brought no explicit reasons for teasing either. But perhaps the suggestions offered here can give at least a partial rationale for the practice. The Nydeggers do acknowledge teasing as an effective disciplinary technique elsewhere in their work (Whiting 1963:841), and refer to it casually several other times.

## *The Setting*

The report is based on ten months' residence in the barrio of Carmelo (a pseudonym), six kilometers inland from the southern coast of Panay Island. Previous to this, an additional three months of preliminary investigation and preteasing had been done in a rural community on neighboring Negros Island.

The Panay community studied is located in the lowlands. It is composed of 150 families or

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a total population of about 900 people, over 95 per cent of whom are small farm owners. Main crops consist of rice, corn, bamboo, and various fruits. There is a local Catholic chapel (over 95 per cent of the population being Roman Catholic), a public elementary school, and a government-supported health center.

Kinship relations in the community are reckoned bilaterally, and linkage of kin ties between households is frequent. An age-respect and obedience pattern exists both between and within generations.

### *The Sample and Method*

Twelve families in the Panay barrio were selected on the basis of availability of children and geographic closeness to the home of the investigator. Observations were made of work, play, and home and school activities of 40 children ranging from 0 to 16 years of age from these 12 families. Interviews, based in part on Whiting et al. (1954), were conducted of each of the 12 mothers as well as 31 of the 33 children from three to 16 years of age. Formal methods of control — those used as specific punishments for specific violations — were investigated to determine whether this could be considered one of the functions of teasing.

The words "teasing" and "joking" are used in this paper in the Filipino sense, to mean not only the milder forms which the words connote in the United States, but also to include harsher forms such as derision, mockery, antagonism, and threats.

### *The Data*

The mothers of 22 of the children were asked: "When your child is naughty, how is he usually punished: The most frequent techniques mentioned were spanking and enforced kneeling, and these were inflicted on 68 per cent of the children involved. Other techniques used on the same 22 children were scolding, threatening about night witches or wild cats, isolation or

withdrawal of love, assignment of chores, and threats to mutilate the child. Similar methods were used by the fathers, but less frequently (as reported by the mothers). Other persons mentioned as sometimes punishing the child included older siblings and an occasional aunt or grandmother.

When the mothers of 21 children from three to 16 years of age were asked: "What can anyone do that makes your child most angry?", the highest response given was for teasing, involving 17 children or 81 per cent of the subsample. Other responses included assignment of chores and refusal of permission to do something or go somewhere.

Of the types of teasing for the 17 children mentioned, 10 could be classified as broadly sexual in nature. These included reference to absurd marriage partners for the child, predictions of no marriage at all, and, most commonly, grabbing at the child's clothes to get at the genitalia for tickling. Other types of teasing mentioned included frustrating or ridiculing accomplishments of the child, making fun of his or her appearance, calling the child by his *bansag* or "joke name," or threatening the abandonment or death of the child.

For comparative purposes, the 31 children in the sample who were over three years of age were asked: "What makes you most angry, and why?" One-third of them mentioned being teased as most objectionable. Other major sources of anger included being assigned various chores (26 per cent) and getting into fights with other children (10 per cent).

*Genital fondling.* Since the practice of genital fondling was mentioned and observed to be a common form of teasing, mothers were asked about this: "How old was your child when you stopped playing with his genitals to amuse or tease him? Or do you still do this sometimes?" Twenty-eight children four years of age or older were reported to have undergone this practice at least up to the age of four. Of these 28 children, 18, ranging in age from five to 16 years, still re-

ceived this treatment. The other 10, ranging from five to 14 years of age, were reported by their mothers as being too old for this. All seven children under the age of four years were currently receiving this form of amusement-teasing.

It was observed that the practice of genital fondling was used as a "pacifier" for most children young enough to still be carried around by their caretakers. For the older child (past two or three years), the practice appears to have changed from a source of amusement to a source of annoyance. This is manifested by the fact that the child usually runs away when anyone threatens to reach for his genitals. An example from the mother of Orland, age 11, will illustrate:

The [the family] all tease Orlando and try to take his pants off to reach his penis, to tickle and play with it. Linda [the eldest sister] also tries putting diapers on him and rocking him like a baby. He doesn't like any of this and tries to get away, and always ends up crying.

When a child becomes older or too quick to be caught by the teaser, the practice changes to verbal threats to grab his or her genitalia or to suggest very old marriage partners for the child. An example of this verbal form was given by the mother of Louela, age 10, who was being teased by her eldest brother, age 21:

He tells her she already has a boyfriend and that he is an old, old man. This makes her furious and I have to tell him to stop when the veins on her neck are already standing out too much [from anger].

*The bansag.* One of the ways of "getting at" or angering a child is to call him by his *bansag* or "joke name," if he has one. Although children are generally ashamed of their own *bansag*, almost half (14 of 31) of the children questioned admitted owning such a name. Mothers volunteered "joke names" for two more children.

Depending upon the meaning of the *bansag*, its use sometimes overlapped previous teasing complaints mentioned. Some of the *bansag*, like "Hammer" or "Pepper," appeared harmless enough in meaning to this investigator. But if used with reference to the child, it would quickly make his blood boil. Other names were easier to associate with anger: "Cry-baby," "Female

Tiger," or "Africana" (in the latter case, light skin is the more highly valued). The only really obnoxious one to this author was a word describing a particular hard form of human feces.

Of the 14 different joke names recorded, nine of them were inherited from the child's parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents.

### Discussion

*Observations.* It appears to this investigator that almost any older person has the privilege of teasing or ridiculing almost anyone younger (and as low or lower in status) than himself. Children are expected to maintain their equilibrium and not cry or get angry when teased. They are told to accept the teasing quietly, and are scolded if they react with anger or tears. But often the teasing of a child will go on and on, much to the amusement of the teaser and bystanders, until the child finally cannot take it any more and breaks down and cries or runs off. An example of this was given by the mother of Helen, age three:

Helen was in the house and was trying to get her dress from an overhead clothesline so she could put it on. But the others didn't want her to have it. So they teased her by keeping it out of her reach. She got very angry and began speaking like an older person. The family likes to make her angry because they enjoy watching her and hearing her speak. Once she began to cry, though, they gave her the dress.

At this point, it often happens that the teaser scolds the child for breaking down, but if the child continues to cry, he or she would be assured soothingly that it was all a "joke."

Another incident which came closer to home concerned my own children, then aged two and four. Once, my husband and I left our children at home in the care of a favorite baby sitter for a rare evening in the city. The following morning, the children told us that someone had insisted to them that we had not just gone to town but had in fact gone on back to the States, leaving them behind and alone.

I frequently observed similar "jokes" played on Filipino children. The result usually was that

the child would cry at the idea of being deserted and would rush in tears to his tormentor or some other known comforter and would seek reassurance that the threat would not be carried out.

*Maintaining the dependence-dominance system.* The purposes of such types of teasing were not easily discernible at first. Later, they were clarified by Mary Hollnsteiner, a Filipina-American sociologist, who suggested that the teasing-threats might serve to undermine the basic security of a child. This would cause the child to run to those closest to him for reassurance. Such a process would increase and reinforce the dominant position of the older person and the dependent position of the younger one. This, then, would be a first function of teasing, and one which refers to the social system in general.

*Providing the teaser with an outlet.* Teasing would also seem to serve the teaser himself. It provides him with a verbal outlet for several emotions:

- (a) resentment of previous teasing received;
- (b) anxiety about sexual matters; and
- (c) aggressive feelings not allowed physical expression.

The first of these, resentment of previous teasing, is suggested by the fact that teasing occurs with much amusement for everyone except the victim. It is clear that teasing places a strain on the one being teased because he is supposed to act as if he does not mind it even though he resents it deeply. Since talking back to an elder is strongly discouraged among Filipinos, an outlet for this strain can be found by turning around and teasing someone younger than oneself.

The second emotion provided with an outlet is suggested by the subject matter of much of the teasing, namely, the predominance of sexual references or gestures. While this investigation is not qualified to diagnose the specific relationship between teasing and sexual anxieties that may exist within a society, nevertheless it appears that teasing is a socially acceptable vehicle for the expression of topics not ordinarily dis-

cussed freely with children. Sex is one of the matters parents rarely discuss with their children. It was reported by the mothers interviewed in this study that of 18 children five years of age or older, eight either did not know where babies came from, or, if they did, they had learned about it from their age-mates rather than from their parents. A few mothers added that they thought the age of marriage (usually in the mid-twenties) was soon enough for their children to learn about such things.

Intolerance of physical aggression, as expressed by most mothers, is provided with verbal outlet through teasing. The mothers interviewed were upset by fighting in any form, and most taught their children to withdraw from potential fighting, even if the child were right. But the use of words is treated more lightly. An older person may "tease-threaten" a younger one with a smile and words of violence (for example, "A truck will run over you and kill you!" or "I'll cut your hands off at the wrists!"), doing so as a "joke," and escape the chastisement due him if he had resorted to physical violence.

*Socialization of the child.* Teasing also serves to prepare the child for acceptance into adult life. Consider, for example, the concept of *hiyâ*<sup>1</sup>, variously translated as shame, timidity, or shyness (Sibley 1956, Hare 1967, Guthrie and Jacobs 1966). *Hiyâ* is a desirable trait especially among low-status persons in general and children in particular. For example, upon receiving a friendly greeting from the author (the wife of a high-status anthropologist), a Filipino child's first typical response was one of acute embarrassment and speechlessness. An older companion of the child would then state with pride that the child "was ashamed."

In the Philippines, interactions with people are governed partly by this idea of shame, and how *not* to bring it upon someone of equal or superior age and/or position. In the case of the village child, the freedom of all his older kin—virtually everyone with whom he has daily contact—to tease him and make him feel ashamed

serves as a constant reminder that they have a say and a stake in his behavior.

An example of this "teasing hierarchy," this time on the adult level, presented itself in the local centralized school system. A supervisor from the town was making a round of inspection of the local village school. In our presence, his eyes twinkled as he teased one of the local teachers because she had no husband. She could only smile and squirm silently. Later, when we attended the district meeting, we met the same town supervisor and *his* superior, the district superintendent. This time it was the latter who twinkled while the town supervisor got the public teasing about his own marital status and eligibility. Then *he* could only smile and squirm silently.

#### Summary

The teasing of children in a Philippine village was observed to take the following main forms:

- (a) making physical or verbal gestures with reference to their genitalia or inventing absurd marriages for them;
- (b) calling them by their *bansag* or "joke names";
- (c) threatening to abandon them.

This teasing appears to serve the following functions:

- (a) it helps society maintain the dependence-obedience system of age obedience.
- (b) it provides the teaser with a verbal outlet for various resentments, anxieties, and aggressions;
- (c) it makes the child aware of his current and future role within his kin group, neighborhood, and ultimately his whole community.

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