



# SILLIMAN JOURNAL

VOLUME 56 NUMBER 3 | JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2015

**A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO DISCUSSION AND INVESTIGATION  
IN THE HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES**

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The Silliman Journal is published quarterly under the auspices of Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines. Entered as second class mail matter at Dumaguete City Post Office on 1 September 1954.

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ISSN 0037-5284

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Annual subscription rates are at PhP600 for local subscribers, and \$35 for overseas subscribers. Subscription and orders for current and back issues should be addressed to

**The Business Manager**

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Silliman University Main Library  
6200 Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental  
Philippines

Issues are also available in microfilm format from

**University Microfilms International**

300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor  
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Cover and book design by Rigel Dela Cruz Suarez  
Cover Artwork by Ana Lacson  
Printing by SU Printing Press, Dumaguete City



VOLUME 56 NUMBER 3  
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**243 Poeticising Love**

Gwee Li Sui

# Poverty, Privilege and Prejudice: Social Psychological Dimensions of Socioeconomic Inequalities in the Philippines

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**Abstract:** Discussions on poverty alleviation in the Philippines often obscure discourses related to the role of those who are not poor, failing to locate poverty within the social inequalities in Philippine society. This article applies social psychological approaches to inquiry on poverty and privilege and assumes that one reason poverty persists is that policies to fight poverty are not being pushed by many privileged Filipinos who hold social motives, beliefs and attitudes that make them more likely to oppose anti-poverty policies. Social psychological theories are used to 1) discuss the half-blindness of privilege that normalizes the experience of wealthy Filipinos; 2) explore the social dominance motive and social beliefs used; and 3) justify social inequalities and privilege. Some general suggestions are proposed on how to target motives, beliefs and attitudes so that Filipinos from all sectors can be allies in pushing for policies that minimize socioeconomic inequalities in Philippine society.

**Keywords:** poverty, privilege, prejudice, intergroup relations, lay theories, social dominance theory, system justification theory, norm theory

## **INTRODUCTION: ASSUMPTIONS, SCOPE, AND LIMITATIONS**

*“Poverty does not persist because there is a scarcity of resource, nor does poverty exist because some societies have inefficient economic systems, lack natural resources, or because poor people lack ambition. Poverty is a product of human social relationships because social relationships*

*determine how people distribute resources... how much or how little people value others in relation to themselves is a fundamental cause of poverty, and that basic aspects of social relations, including prejudice, power, violence, and inter-group dominance, work together in the creation and maintenance of poverty” (Lemieux & Pratto, 2003, p. 147)*

*“...the Philippine elites have the financial capacity to pull the country out of poverty but yet it’s their apathy and lack of priorities that prevent them from using this money to achieve social progress” (Celdran, 2007)*

The two quotations present a human explanation as to why poverty persists in the Philippines; both quotations refer to characteristics of how different groups of Filipinos relate to each other. The first quotation points to the vast amounts of wealth and natural resources that can be found in many countries with high incidences of poverty which arises because of how such resources are distributed. This fact is attested to by government statistics on economic inequality. Data from the National Statistics Office’s Family Income and Expenditures Surveys in 2006, 2009, and 2012 (Albert, 2013) indicated that the poorest 20% of Filipino families shared only 6% of the national income, whereas the wealthiest 20% of Filipino families shared almost 50%. Further analyses by the National Statistics Development Board (Albert, 2013) indicated that the income of the wealthiest 20% of families is eight times more than the income of the poorest 20%.

The trends showing vast income inequalities have not changed over the last decades, even during periods of economic growth (Balisacan, 2012). Indeed, historical data have indicated that economic growth tended to disproportionately benefit the richer sectors of the population (Balisacan & Pernia, 2002), and this contributes to widening the existing gaps between the country’s rich and poor. As the Philippine economy has registered strongly positive growth rates in the most recent years, economists have warned against the possibility that such growth would exacerbate these socioeconomic inequalities; a likely scenario is that the Philippine economy improves with rich families become richer, while poor families remain poor. On this point, the second quotation above underscores the social intergroup dimension of poverty in the Philippines. Celdran (2007) implicated a subgroup of Philippine society for its lack of care and willingness to redress the inequitable distribution of income and wealth in the country that would improve the lives of other subgroups of Philippine society; his argument

is a concrete exemplification of the social psychological processes that contribute to the causes and to the factors that maintain poverty and social inequality suggested by Lemieux and Pratto (2003) in the first quotation.

This article focuses on the social psychological aspect of poverty and social inequality in the Philippines: the social psychological processes and factors that characterize how the better-off Filipinos think about the poorer Filipinos. The thesis is not that these social psychological processes are the only or even the main cause of poverty and social inequality in the Philippines. The various societal processes that shape poverty in the country are all important forces to consider for a full understanding of poverty in the Philippines. Moreover, the important role of empowering and capacitating poor persons to help them get themselves out of poverty is another process to consider in this discussion. However, this article aims to put to the fore a critical factor that is often obscured in discussions of causes of poverty and of ways to help people get out of poverty: the social psychology that underlies the privileged social position of the wealthy (or non-poor) vis-à-vis the poor sectors of society.

Pratto and Stewart (2012) referred to the “half-blindness of privilege.” As poor people are identified and marked as the “problematic” group in society that deserves people’s concern and assistance, it is often neglected to describe the contrasting group (i.e. rich and all non-poor persons) and their superior social position in an unequal and hierarchical social system. It is argued that the unmarked situation of the dominant wealthy groups suggests that their status and social dominance should not be problematized. Their social position of privilege may entail an implicit assumption that this privilege is normal, and that social dominance, superior social position and greater social agency are not considered privileges.

The normalizing of privilege in an unequal society is likely to give rise to similar cognitive distortions about the problematized group. As such, poverty in the Philippines may be partly due to how some Filipinos in higher socioeconomic groups think about poverty and poor people. People’s stance about how to help poor people relate to particular ways of perceiving, feeling and thinking about poor people and about the reason they are poor. When thoughts about poor people generalize negative qualities or attributes to all poor people, there is prejudice against poor people, and prejudicial thoughts about any group are not likely to motivate pro-social actions towards the group. Indeed, prejudice is more likely to motivate inaction or even harmful actions towards the target group. But specific forms of prejudice about poor people may

also motivate seemingly helpful actions that actually assist poor people in ways that do not actually help poor people get out of poverty. This article discusses how beliefs regarding intergroup hierarchy and how social dominance motives may be associated with prejudice against poor people. It aims to understand the social psychological processes and the factors that may give rise to these beliefs and thoughts, in order to discern how to deal with the effects of these potentially harmful implicit and invisible psychological processes. To address this objective, this article covers the following: (a) the theoretical lenses from social cognitive psychology that define the basic arguments; (b) observations regarding negative attitudes or prejudice against poor people and attributions of poverty; (c) the process by which social cognitions related to poverty and privilege constrain people's thoughts about solutions to poverty; and (d) solutions to correcting the potentially harmful effects of these social psychological processes.

### **CONSTRUCTING POVERTY AND PRIVILEGE: THEORETICAL LENSES**

The focus of this article is how Filipinos in higher socioeconomic groups perceive, think about, and relate to poor Filipinos and how they understand poverty, its causes, and solutions. This focus draws from the basic approach in social cognition which seeks to understand how people process, store and use information about other people and other groups of people, and how these cognitions influences people's behavior, feelings, and social interactions with other people and groups. Thus, constructions of poverty are likely to shape cognitions and behaviors related to how wealth is distributed in Philippine society or how social inequalities are maintained in Philippine society. There are some social psychological theories of intergroup relations that can make sense of these attitudes, attributions and other social cognitions related to poverty.

The first theoretical approach draws from the role of the social dominance motive in intergroup relations. Social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) is premised on the observation that most social collectives are hierarchical in structure and that people have different orientations towards these social hierarchies. The theory proposes that people differ in their social dominance orientation (SDO) or in the motive to accept group-based social inequalities and maintain the hierarchical and unequal relationships between groups. Research in various countries have shown that SDO is strongly associated with prejudice towards lower-status groups (Fischer, Hanke, & Sibley, 2012). More importantly,

members of higher status groups have stronger SDO and the relationship between SDO and prejudice is stronger for individuals who are members of advantaged social groups (Sibley & Liu, 2010). The stronger relationship between SDO and prejudice among members of higher status groups is also associated with support for social policies that serve to maintain and intensify the group-based social hierarchies (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998). These studies have pointed to the important role of social dominance motive as a factor that contributes to privileged individuals' prejudice against lower-status groups, and their attitudes and actions towards bridging the group-based social hierarchies.

The social cognitions of members of privileged social groups towards social hierarchies can also be understood from the theoretical lens of norm theory, which may explain why rich people can be blind to their privilege as dominant group members in a highly unequal society even as they are aware of the disadvantage of poor people. Norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) proposes that people implicitly view particular groups as normal and that people construction of the "difference" of other social groups is with reference to the normal group. Applying the norm theory to understanding social cognitions about dominant and subordinate groups, research has shown that when asked about difference between these two groups, people typically referred to stereotyped features of the subordinate group more often than on features of the dominant group (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). The ascription of norm to a particular social category is implicitly achieved through abstraction of mental representations of different social experiences. In hierarchical societies, members of privileged groups know more about their own personal conditions and social experiences, especially as media and social institutions present their experience and points of view more often than other social groups (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Thus, the implicit cognitive norms for social groups that develop refer to the privileged groups' experiences. These social category norms result in the conflation members of the normal dominant group's their identities and experiences as that of the entire society (Leach, Snyder, & Iyer, 2002).

A third theoretical lens is system justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), which assumes that people are motivated by the need to affirm the legitimacy of the current social system and to see the system as being fair and just. Rationalizing the status quo and accepting inequality as just and even inevitable is an expression of this motive (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Research has shown that the system-justifying motive predicts tendencies to believe in myths that legitimize inequality between social groups (Schmader, Major, Eccleston,

& McCoy, 2001), thereby stereotyping lower status group to rationalize status difference between groups especially when there are perceived threats to the system (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

The last theoretical lens draws from the lay theories approach to intergroup relations. Lay theories are sets of beliefs that people have about humans, groups and societies that are often intuitive and implicit but provide strong guides to how people perceive, understand, and relate to other individuals and groups (Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006). There are many different intergroup lay theories; this article considers meritocracy and Protestant work ethic. Meritocracy refers to a set of beliefs that assume that there are limited rewards in society and these rewards should be allocated based on merit, talent, and performance; people who enjoy more social rewards and higher social status do so because of meritorious reasons (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer & Hunyady, 2003). Protestant work ethic refers to the belief that hard work leads to success, and reciprocal success is achieved through persistence and hardwork (Levy, West, Ramirez, & Karafantis, 2006).

Lay theories not only provide cognitive frames to make sense of why some people are successful and enjoy greater social rewards, but they also explain and justify why there is inequality. These lay theories imply that people or groups are unsuccessful (i.e. enjoying less social rewards) because they are not meritorious, are not hardworking, and deserve less in society. Research shows how belief in these lay theories is consistently associated with negative attitudes towards and blaming of lower status groups (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). This consequently implies that a group's relatively lower status and one's negative attitudes towards low-status groups (Levy et al., 2006), and the belief in the unequal social system is justifiable (Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Phol, 2011). The assumptions of these theoretical approaches are applied in this article to understand anti-poor cognitions and behaviors of some Filipinos who belong to the higher socioeconomic classes.

## POVERTY-RELATED ATTITUDES

*“The poor are not really nice people. They’re ignorant, they’re distrustful, they’re the biggest snobs one can find, they are ungrateful... And they’re balasubas (rogues)...Matumal (slow) and then they take advantage... They feel they’ve a right; they have a mendicancy attitude... That’s their attitude and it prevents them from raising themselves up [Quote #5: Prominent Chinese-Filipino businessman]” (Clark & Sison, 2003).*

*“You just look at the way your maids treat you. If they break a dish, they will hide it in the garden. If you ask for it, they will say ‘I don’t know where it is’. And if the neighbour [offers] her five pesos more, she will leave [to work for the neighbor] and say ‘my mother is sick’. She’ll never tell you ‘I need more money. I need a raise’. Isn’t that the way they behave” [Quote #7: Socialite](Clark & Sison, 2003).*

The two quotations were taken from interviews of 80 members of the Philippine elite in the study of Clark and Sison (2003). The quotations are not representative of all survey respondents, but they were chosen to exemplify how some members of the privileged sectors of society hold rather extremely negative views about poor people. Not all rich people hold such negative views about poor people. The social psychological question is “What factors underlie such negative beliefs in some people?”

Recent studies point to the effect of the social dominance motive in the negative attitudes of Filipinos from higher socioeconomic groups. In two studies (Bernardo, 2013), Filipino respondents from higher socioeconomic groups who had higher SDO were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards poor Filipinos compared to near wealthy and middle-class Filipinos. This was observed in both the cognitive and affective dimensions of these attitudes. On the cognitive dimension, those who had higher SDO were more likely to ascribe negative stereotypes traits to poor Filipinos (e.g. lazy, undisciplined) and were less likely to ascribe positive traits (e.g. humble, friendly). On the affective dimensions of attitude, those who had higher SDO were less likely to feel empathic emotions (e.g., sympathy, compassion) but were more likely to feel colder and more negatively towards poor persons. Consistent with the assumptions of social dominance theory (Levin et al., 1998), the relationship between SDO and attitudes towards poor people were only observed in the participants from higher socioeconomic groups. The social dominance motive did not predict attitudes among participants from lower socioeconomic groups.

Other studies (Bernardo, 2012) found consistent patterns of personal perception judgment when comparing a poor person who had become wealthy to wealthy person who had become poor. Respondents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds consistently rated the person who became wealthy as being more competent, socially adroit, and virtuous compared to the person who became poor. There were more negative ascriptions of the person who became poor compared to those who became rich among the study respondents

who also held strong meritocracy beliefs. Thus, the belief that social rewards should be reserved for those who are talented and who perform well tends to amplify the negative attitudes towards people who fall down the socioeconomic ladder.

There are three important features of the above studies showing expressions of negative attitudes towards poor Filipinos. First, the negative attitudes were manifestations of prejudice against a group of people and negative perceptions generalized to a group of individuals whose only common characteristic was the fact that they did not have much money. Second, the negative attitudes seemed to arise from motives and beliefs that are known to be associated with the acceptance, justification, and maintenance of social inequality (i.e. SDO, meritocracy, Protestant work ethic). Thus, this prejudice towards poor Filipinos may be a manifestation of motivated social cognitions related to the tacit approval and rationalization of social inequality. Third, this prejudice and associated social motives and beliefs are observed mainly among Filipinos from higher socioeconomic groups who occupy more privileged positions in the hierarchical society.

## ATTRIBUTIONS OF POVERTY

*“The difference between the wealthy mindset from the poor mindset: Rich people believe ‘I create my life.’ Poor people believe ‘Life happens”* (<http://bosanchezwisdom.blogspot.com/2012/02/bo-sanchez-quotes.html>).

*“What separates rich people and poor people is how much wisdom they’ve applied in their lives”* (<http://bosanchezquote.blogspot.com/>).

*“Permanently poor people blame their poverty on everything else but themselves. And it’s so easy to do that. But if you keep blaming your financial condition on things outside yourself, you’ll never become rich”* Sanchez (2007).

The three quotations have one important point in common: they all blame poverty on the characteristics of poor people themselves. The first two implicate the beliefs and lack of wisdom of poor people; the third disapproves of the attribution of poverty to external causes and the alleged unwillingness of poor

people to take responsibility for their plight. The quotations come from the writings of Bo Sanchez, a person who has devoted his work to helping poor people in the Philippines and is most certainly not a person who might be motivated to distance himself from poor Filipinos. This fact, however, underscores the point that even people who have the sincerest intentions towards helping poor people may hold prejudiced beliefs about the poor.

There have been studies that inquired into how Filipinos attribute the causes of poverty, and these studies generally show that Filipinos from different sectors of society have an appreciation of the structural causes of poverty; that is, survey studies have indicated that Filipinos tend to attribute the causes of poverty to factors external to the poor person. This is true in surveys of poor Filipinos who generally refer to family circumstances (Tuason, 2008), availability of jobs (Generalao, 2005) and other societal factors as causes of the current financial situation. External attributions of poverty that refer to historical antecedents, government policies and inability to provide basic services along with business practices and corruption are also typically mentioned by anti-poverty activists (Hine, Montiel, Cooksey, & Lewko, 2005) and by Filipinos from the elite sectors of society (Clarke & Sison, 2003). However, the Filipino elite are also likely to make internal attributions of poverty, describing this state as being caused by personal qualities of poor persons such as laziness, fatalism, and lack of ambition (Clarke & Sison, 2003). Related to this form of internal attribution of poverty are references to “culture of poverty” that ascribe a subculture among poor people characterized by shared dysfunctional values, beliefs, and behaviors such as the lack of ambition or aspiration, propensity to engage in high-risk behaviors, fatalism, feelings of helplessness, and dependence. This culture of poverty seems to be the mindset that Bo Sanchez was referring to in the three quotations cited above, and such mindset actually embodies negative stereotypes that blame poor people for their poverty. However, the conception of a culture of poverty is not actually supported by the evidence (Gorki, 2008). Various studies among poor Filipinos have pointed to strong achievement orientations and self-efficacy (Obligacion, 2004), perseverance and shared agency (Tuason, 2008), optimism, intention, and effort directed towards finding jobs (Generalao, 2005) as inconsistent with the culture-of-poverty perspective. The culture-of-poverty attribution is probably best seen as a myth composed of stereotypes about poor people (Gorki, 2008).

So why do these culture-of-poverty myths and this tendency to blame poor people for their plight persist? Research suggests that similar motives and

beliefs associated with the acceptance and justification of social inequalities may be important explanatory factors. A recent study (Bernardo, 2013) found that SDO was a significant predictor of the tendency to view internal and culture-of-poverty attributions as causes of poverty; but this result was found only among Filipinos from higher socioeconomic groups. Consistent with assumptions of social dominance theory, the acceptance of social inequality and the desire to maintain their dominant position in the social hierarchy motivates the tendency to blame poor people and to ascribe a subculture of poverty which rationalizes the subordinate position of poor people in Philippine society. Recent research (Bernardo, Levy, Lytle, & Luo, 2015) also have also shown that belief in the Protestant work ethic (i.e. hard work leads to success) is positively associated with endorsement of stereotyped traits that blame poor people for their plight (e.g. undisciplined, lazy). This result provided further evidence to how lay beliefs that justify intergroup inequalities may shape Filipinos' social cognitions of poverty. The same social motives and beliefs that motivate prejudice against poor people in the Philippines are associated with poverty attributions that tend to blame poverty as being caused by poor people themselves.

## **PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOLUTIONS TO POVERTY**

*“Although it may sound elitist to you the fact is this country is built on the foundation of haves, have-nots and wannabes. One group will never get the culture of the other... and frankly I don't want to be someone to bridge the gap between socioeconomic classes. I leave that to the politicians in my family who believe they can actually help” (Fernandez, 2007).*

This quotation from a Filipino lifestyle columnist is a rather bald-faced statement of indifference and may be read as an extreme point-of-view that does not represent the sentiments of most other wealthy Filipinos. However, what can be seen in this statement is how the acceptance of social inequality is taken as a matter of fact, and that this assumption serves as the premise for the columnist's lack of any interest in bridging the socioeconomic gap. This point-of-view may not be that isolated. A survey by Pulse Asia (2013) pointed to marked differences in how the wealthier and poorest sectors of Philippine society perceive the most urgent national concerns. In particular, compared to those from the lowest

socioeconomic group, those from the highest socioeconomic group were much less likely to consider poverty-related issues as being of urgent concern. Considering the significance of the following issues--controlling inflation, improving/increasing pay of workers, creating more jobs, and reducing poverty of many Filipinos—it is quite curious why wealthy Filipinos were 9% to 13% less likely to consider these as urgent national concerns than the poorest Filipinos. If attitudes towards poor people and attributions of poverty among Filipinos in the higher socioeconomic groups seem to be motivated by social dominance and other inequality justifying lay beliefs, it seems reasonable to infer that similar motives and beliefs may also underlie some wealthier Filipinos' apathy towards the plight of poor persons and their unconcern about socioeconomic inequalities. Unfortunately, there seems to be no available Philippine research to clarify the social cognitive processes that can explain perceptions and attitudes towards anti-poverty policies and programs. However, there are relevant studies in other countries that show how these similar social dominance motives and beliefs that justify social inequality are associated with opposition to social programs and policies that favor low-status social groups (hierarchy-attenuating policies) and with support for programs and policies that favor high-status groups (hierarchy-enhancing policies) (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Rosenthal, Levy & Moyer, 2011; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It would be important to investigate whether these same factors influence support or opposition for anti-poverty programs in the Philippines.

Interestingly, culture-of-poverty beliefs may also be motivating a different set of attitudes and approaches regarding helping the poor. It can be recalled from the study of Bernardo (2012) that people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds consistently rated more positively the person who became wealthy compared to the person who became poor. That study also showed that belief in the culture-of-poverty tended to weaken the negative ascriptions of the person who became poor. The culture-of-poverty belief seemed to dispose the respondents to have more positive ascriptions of persons who become poor. Such is the opposite of the influence of belief in meritocracy. Thus, although culture-of-poverty beliefs expressed rather negative views about the poor, the belief may not ascribe the negative qualities on poor persons themselves but on a sociocultural situation. The culture-of-poverty belief, therefore, may not be a simple internal attribution of the causes of poverty on the individual person; instead, the culture-of-poverty attribution might actually recognize how the poor person's agency is inextricably linked to aspects of his/her social environment.

Attitudes regarding programs to help the poor could also be understood within the frame of helping among non co-equals. The relationship between the helper and the recipient is an inherently unequal relationship: the recipient is dependent both on the helper's goodwill and resources (Nadler, 2002). Thus, when wealthier Filipinos try to help poor Filipinos, the hierarchical relationship between these two groups in society may be echoed in the helping relationship. But what may be important is the orientation of how the Filipino in higher socioeconomic groups choose to help the poor. Social psychologists differentiate between dependency-oriented and autonomy-oriented help (Nadler, 2002). Dependency-oriented help provides a full solution to the problem and indicates the helper's assumption that the recipient cannot help himself or herself. In the long run, this form of help intensifies the unequal hierarchical relationship between the helper and target and further promotes dependency. Perhaps, more importantly, dependency-oriented help may be seen as the helper's implicit assertion of dominance and control over the recipient. In contrast, autonomy-oriented help provides partial and/or temporary solution to the problem and indicates the helper's assumption that the recipient can actually handle the problem himself or herself if given some appropriate tools or assistance. Previous research showed that dependency-oriented help was more likely to come from individuals who were high in SDO (Halabi, Dovidio, & Nadler, 2008). The divergent opinions regarding programs to help the poor may be based on whether people perceived it as dependency-oriented or autonomy-oriented help.

The preceding arguments on the relationship between social motivations, lay theories, and beliefs and approaches to helping poor people are mainly speculative. Future research may be conducted to directly explore the role of social motivations and beliefs in determining who would support or oppose particular programs and policies to combat poverty. Research could also reveal how social motivations and beliefs might predispose Filipinos to support one type of anti-poverty program but oppose another type. The influence of these social motivations and beliefs may be seen not only in programs that directly assist poor people (e.g. increasing minimum wage; controlling the price basic commodities and public transportation) but also in policies that seek to reduce social inequalities such as those that involve wealth redistribution (e.g. progressive taxation), building of assets for the community and investment in human capital (e.g. strengthening basic education; improving access to health services).

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## HUMAN AND SOCIAL SOLUTIONS

How do these ideas point to possible solutions to the problem of poverty and social inequality in the Philippines? The direct solutions will take the form of economic policies for inclusive economic development, and improved governance at all levels and interventions that empower both individuals and communities to be active agents in combating social inequality. This article tries to present answers to why there are Filipinos who do not support such policies and instead oppose efforts to bridge the widening socioeconomic divide in Philippine society. It tries to present answers to why there are Filipinos who do not even think that poverty is a problem that needs to be addressed.

As the opening quotation suggests, poverty persists in society because there are people who wittingly or unwittingly conspire to maintain the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in society. This conspiracy is founded on some very basic social psychological concepts: the acceptance of social inequality and social hierarchy as normal and legitimate; the motive to preserve one's dominant status in this social hierarchy, which means keeping others in their subordinate status; and the use of an array of beliefs to justify one's dominant status and others' subordinate status and to rationalize the legitimacy of the whole system that maintains the social hierarchy. It would be wrong to assert that the correcting these motives, beliefs, and attitudes in Filipinos from the higher socioeconomic groups would solve the problem of poverty and social inequality in the Philippines as the solutions need to be structural and multidimensional. But it is an undeniable fact of Philippine social life that policy decisions that can impact on the lives of many people are made by those from the privileged sectors of society. The country's decision makers in government, industry, and even in the non-government sector are over-represented by Filipinos from higher socioeconomic groups, and it would not be surprising that many of them would display the problematic social psychological motives, beliefs, and attitudes.

Now we can consider some human solutions that may contribute to the transformation of motives, beliefs, and attitudes related to poor persons and to poverty. The suggestions will focus on the following broad themes: (a) pro-poor mindsets, (b) educating privilege, and (c) shaping of institutions, with some specific suggestions within each theme.

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## PRO-POOR MINDSETS AND MINDFULNESS

Psychologists primarily work with individuals, and the first cluster of human solutions discussed relates to being mindful about the implicit social motives and beliefs that may or may not be helping the poor. It is very likely that these social motives and beliefs are not always made explicit, but they exert powerful influence on people's actions and dispositions. The first step towards developing pro-poor mindsets and transforming anti-poor mindsets involves making the implicit explicit by exposing any implicitness and by making people more conscious of their mindsets, motives, and beliefs. With appropriate levels of mindfulness, transformation of mindsets can then follow. Psychoeducational interventions, campaigns in media and schools, and various informational programs can promote more pro-poor mindsets, motives, and beliefs. What need to be considered are three of these beliefs that should be prime targets of exposure and transformation: poverty myths, prejudice against the poor, and hierarchy-enhancing policies.

### Rethinking the Myths of Poverty in the Philippines

In all human societies, important social problems are viewed from the perspective of discursive frames that are articulated and negotiated through society's various institutions. Similarly, individual Filipinos' views and stances regarding poverty are likely to have been shaped by how their parents and relatives talk about the poor, how their schools may or may not have engaged them in understanding the causes of intergenerational poverty, how news and entertainment media contrive portraits of the lives of poor people, how religious organizations frame appropriate actions towards poor people and how government presents and rationalizes options to deal with the problem of poverty. The same social institutions also provide perspectives on wealth, privilege and social status; these perspectives may or may not make references to poverty, unequal distribution of social resources and hierarchical social relations.

In this regard, social psychologists can help Filipinos in all sectors of society by critically engaging the various poverty-related discourses in Philippine society. Perhaps the most important critical stance should be directed towards discourses that ignore the long-standing social inequalities in Philippine society, and normalize and justify the privilege of the economic

and political elite. In concrete terms, the aim should be towards greater critical awareness and willingness to interrogate all forms of poverty-related discourses. When elected politicians speak of programs for poor families and communities among constituencies, people should be willing to ask why the politicians' own families are becoming richer when their constituents remain poor. When religious leaders preach about being charitable and helping the poor, one should be willing to inquire about the vast real estate and financial holdings of religious organizations. When news and entertainment media dish out stories of how their companies serve poor people by giving away huge prizes and by granting their wishes, viewers should be willing to query about how much income from advertisement such shows earn for their organizations and how many requests from poor and needy people are systematically rejected in the process of producing their shows because the requests may not have the desired entertainment values. People need to ask such critical questions because the myths of poverty are often created and sustained by individuals, groups, and institutions that enjoy the privileges that come with being members of the dominant social sectors of Philippine society. As the social psychological research suggests, beliefs about poverty and wealth are closely linked with motives, some of which might be largely self-serving on the part of those who seek to maintain and justify their privileged position in Philippine society.

### **Reducing Prejudice**

The myths about poverty are often crystallized in stereotypes about poor people. Many of these stereotypes are negative – that poor people are lazy and undisciplined, have no aspirations, expect dole outs and can be made to do anything (including vote for a particular candidate) with minimum compensation. Some of the stereotypes may be positive – that poor people lead uncomplicated but happy lives, have simple views of the world, are trusting and have a pure heart, and have a strong spirit that allows them to endure their harsh circumstances with a smile. Such stereotypes are perpetuated by the same social institutions that frame the discourses on poverty in Philippine society, and are likely to be accepted and internalized by Filipinos in middle and upper socioeconomic classes who have little or no meaningful interactions with poor people. It is easy to indulge in such stereotypes when one's interactions with poor persons are limited to seeing beggars in the streets,

viewing petty criminals on news programs, and watching two-dimensional romantic characters on television and movies. Indeed, there are very limited opportunities where the haves and have-nots of Philippine society can even meet. Poor and rich persons live in markedly different communities located in well demarcated geographic spaces. Poor people commute in public transport systems while the rich commute in their private vehicles. Poor people eat and purchase their material needs in different types of eateries and stores from the rich. Poor families send their children to public schools, and the children of the rich go to private schools or to schools in other countries. Within the social bubble where the privileged Filipinos live, it is easy to construct their personal experiences as the norm and to problematize the experiences of poor people in stereotypical terms.

As these stereotypes are mere perceptions, they are likely to be benign most of the time. But stereotypes can be socially harmful if the negative stereotyped perceptions become hardened prejudices that motivate apathy and even discriminatory acts towards poor people. When the maid or the driver routinely become the first suspect when something is misplaced or lost in the household, that is a clear act of discrimination based on prejudice. Prejudices against poor people may motivate refusal to do simple acts that provide short-term relief to poor people. When someone says, “Huwag ka nang magbigay ng limos, at malamang ay ibibili lang yan ng alak o itataya sa jueteng” (Don’t both giving money to poor people, as that would most likely be used to buy liquor or to make a bet), the sentiment is premised on prejudice. At a societal level, skepticism over government policies and private sector programs to help poor people might also be partly based on deeply held prejudices, as when land reform policies are rejected on the notion that the farmers are likely to lose the land given to them anyway because they do not have the capacity, motivation, and wherewithal to keep their farm lands productive.

Prejudices become even more harmful to society if they are used to justify current social inequalities, to blame poor people as solely responsible for their plight and to resist even the thought that Philippine society could ever be less unequal. Prejudice against poor persons has complex negative consequences, and as such, social psychologists should find ways to reduce these stereotypes, and to build more constructive and respectful representations of the different poor communities in Philippine society. Contact theory (Brown & Hewstone, 2005) and other social psychological theories have provided conceptual guides and empirical evidence that suggest ways for minimizing intergroup

stereotypes and prejudice. At the core of these suggestions is increased contact between the target and the holder of stereotypes in intimate, cooperative, and co-equal status interactions. In their own way, private schools that hold community immersion activities with their students try to implement these principles. However, such activities need to involve truly cooperative activities, not only those where one group helps the other. The premise in such forms of contact is that individuals from the different social groups learn more detailed information about each other, and when such detailed information become more cognitively available and salient, they can be used to contradict the stereotypes and also to build a better understanding of group differences.

### **Guarding against Hierarchy-Enhancing Policies**

There are many policies and organizational reforms that would be effective in helping poor persons escape from poverty. Nonetheless, economic development planners also point to the need for more inclusive economic development policies, especially as the country's economy grows at a faster rate which might exacerbate economic divides. In this regard, poverty reduction policies should also indicate how economic growth would benefit poor people. Anti-poverty policies are not limited to those that provide direct assistance to poor people; they also include economic policies that expand the opportunities for and capabilities of poor people to raise their income and productivity. There are also policies that involve forms of economic redistribution to minimize huge income and wealth disparities. More importantly, there are economic development policies that may actually impair the poor's capacity to work themselves out of poverty or restrict the opportunities for them to do so.

Theories and research distinguishing between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating policies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) suggest that social dominance motives and system-justifying beliefs are likely to be associated with support for the former and with opposition to the latter. We need to be more careful in considering various anti-poverty programs as they may actually involve hierarchy-enhancing elements. Similarly, any policy at any level might actually have hierarchy-enhancing features, even if they do not explicitly refer to poor people. As the Philippines continues in its upward economic development, there should be greater vigilance against implicit motives that might push towards policies that unintentionally create more social inequality. As with Filipino discourses about poverty and prejudices about poor people,

there should also be greater mindfulness about the implicit social motives and beliefs related to our stance about policies that directly or indirectly relate to poverty and social inequality.

## **EDUCATING PRIVILEGE**

The research reviewed point to the potent influence of social dominance motives and system-justifying beliefs among Filipinos from the higher socioeconomic groups. Such findings are consistent with research and theory that shows how individuals born into privilege are likely to normalize their own experiences as members of dominant social groups in their society and are also more likely be motivated to maintain and to justify their privileged status in society. Fortunately or unfortunately, most of the leaders and decision makers in the Philippines come from this privileged sector of our society, so educating persons of privilege in the Philippines can have important social impacts.

Educating privilege should begin with making privileged people aware of their own privilege by creating greater awareness and understanding of social inequalities in the Philippines and of the social processes that create and maintain these inequalities. Beyond awareness, persons of privilege can be educated on egalitarian ideals and values; in other words, persons of privilege should be educated to problematize their own privilege and aim to develop stronger empathy for the less privileged members of Philippine society. Some researchers on the psychology of privilege have began exploring the development of “ally identity” by encouraging reflections on privileged and oppressed social identities in unequally social relations (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Ally identities refer to stronger appreciation of social identities associated with different status social groups, and this leads to greater opportunities for activism, behaviors and beliefs that do not conform with privileged social identities and/or greater empathy for less privileged social groups. These efforts to educate the privileged towards more egalitarian motives, beliefs, and behaviors are still in their earliest exploratory stages and have not focused on socioeconomic privilege (Case, Kanenberg, Erich, & Tittsworth, 2012). More research needs to be done to understand educational programs and other forms of intervention that might work in the Philippine context. Fortunately, many exemplars of Filipinos from very privileged backgrounds who are very active allies of poor Filipinos, and their personal education and social development can serve as good models for how to educate the privileged.

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## SHAPING INSTITUTIONS BY MATCHING INDIVIDUALS

Social institutions play a great role in shaping discourses that may promote social dominance motives, system-justifying beliefs, and other hierarchy-enhancing ideas. As such, it is expected that some institutions may be inherently and possibly more consistently hierarchy-enhancing in their goals and activities (e.g. financial and other profit-oriented organizations) while others might emphasize more hierarchy-attenuating goals and activities (e.g. human rights and public welfare organizations) (Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004). Other organizations seem to express contradictory tendencies, and the Catholic church of the Philippines seems to be a good example. There are members of the Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines who have dedicated their mission to being one with the poorest communities in the different parts of the country, even joining in movement to resist oppressive forces from the powerful sectors of society. But other members of the same Catholic hierarchy seem more inclined to enjoy the entitlements of being revered representatives, being party to various hierarchy-enhancing processes within the church community, maintaining exclusive and elitist schools and church-related lay organization, and even taking roles as courtiers of the most powerful.

It would be interesting to observe which types of organizations and which sectors within large social organizations play a more visible and active role in shaping public discourses and government policies. However, it should be kept in mind that these institutions are actually led and staffed by individuals whose social motives, dispositions and values may or may not converge with the organizations' own goals, and values to different degrees. One would expect that there is a lot of self-selection that takes place in the human resource complement of the various types of organizations where organizations recruit individuals that share similar values and where individuals also seek to work in organizations that would also allow them to express their personal values (Sidanius et al., 2004). As individuals stay in the organization, they continue to be socialized into the values of the organization and eventually are even made to contribute to the shaping of the organizational values. But organizations can and do change. Recent movements for corporate social responsibility, for example, have shown how businesses which are essentially hierarchy-enhancing in their motives and meritocratic in their internal processes can redefine their goals to include more egalitarian ideals. We now hear of businesses where the goal is no longer to increase profit and market share at all cost but where there is an explicit attempt

to redistribute profit in some way. These shifts in the emphasis of business are likely pushed by groups of individuals in leadership positions of the businesses supported by like-minded personnel. The motives of such businesses are probably still not as hierarchy-attenuating as community-based cooperatives are; indeed, some cynical observers would conjecture that corporate social responsibility is just another way of getting tax breaks to increase profits. However, one can see how more egalitarian-oriented people (or low SDO individuals) may be drawn to such organizations in the hope of building and strengthening the hierarchy-attenuating programs and activities of the organization.

The national government is perhaps the biggest organization that is supposed to address the problem of socioeconomic inequality in the Philippines. Unfortunately, we have continued to elect people and have witnessed the appointment of people who are half-blind to their privilege and who are motivated to maintain, enhance and justify their privilege. These people execute their official government functions in ways that further promote hierarchy-enhancing policies and ignore or oppose policies that have the potential to attenuate the entrenched social hierarchies. When these elected and appointed leaders act to help the poor, the help is typically dependent-oriented help that fits the template of patronage designed to keep poor people perpetually poor and beholden to the socioeconomic and political elites of society. However, there are exceptions when communities organize themselves to resist the candidates of the entrenched powers and rally behind alternative candidates who represent a more egalitarian vision for their communities, daring to go against the self-selection of personnel in government (i.e. the cynical view that only corrupt persons are attracted to government service). If ever there will be a real hope of transforming the national government to be more responsive to the needs of the growing numbers of poor Filipinos, it would have to come from the election of a critical mass of individuals guided by pro-poor motives and beliefs and by the vision of a non-hierarchical Philippine society. This article, however, falls short of prescriptions on how to get such individuals actually elected into office but instead approaches the end with that signal of hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

Solving the big problem of poverty in the Philippines will require a whole package of government policies supported by private sector programs and

initiatives – policies and programs that aim to create opportunities and build assets and capacities among poor people to help themselves escape from intergenerational poverty. This article calls attention to various discourses that are often obscured in anti-poverty discussions that ignore the persistent social inequalities within which poverty is socially located. These obscured discourses relate to those who are not poor and to those who may even want to help the poor. There is a need to surface these obscured discourses because policies to fight poverty are not being pushed with more resoluteness as many Filipinos who may be in the position to push for these policies are actually holding implicit motives, beliefs, and attitudes that make them more likely to oppose or to simply ignore these anti-poverty policies.

But with this rather cynical belief comes a solid dose of optimism. From the empirical and theoretical expositions, the article proposes some general suggestions on how to target these implicit motives, beliefs, and attitudes that may be transformed. Perhaps the social psychology of the privileged Filipinos could be transformed so that they can be allies of Filipinos living in poverty in their own attempts to improve their lives and to contribute productively to the building of a nation that is not divided by socioeconomic differences.

## AUTHOR NOTE

Preparation of the article was supported by a research grant from the Research Development and Administration Office of the University of Macau (Grant No.: MYRG2014-00099-FSS).

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## **From Social Consciousness to Radical Political Action: A Response to Allan B. I. Bernardo's Social Psychology of Poverty**

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**A**t the outset, I want to make my position clear that I share Allan B. I. Bernardo's social psychology of poverty, which, as I see it, is expressed most visibly in his attempt to promote socio-economic equality in the Philippines by way of poverty reduction. The burgeoning poverty in the Philippines is indeed an urgent issue that demands serious consideration. In fact, this is an interesting research theme that has drawn considerable attention from several young Filipino scholars, especially in the field of "development studies" construed more broadly. I therefore commend Bernardo's contribution to this scholarship given the perspicacity of his noble intention.

Yet, certain issues relating to the practicability of his proposal and his reluctance to come to grips with real causes of poverty have to be dealt with squarely—at the end of it all I have to engage in this tussle of showing how much (or rather how less?) Bernardo has done justice to the issue of reducing, if not completely eradicating, poverty in the Philippines to the minimum. My response to Bernardo will focus on these two points. On the one hand, I argue that the alternatives he offers to the problem of poverty in the Philippines appear to be untenable. As we can see, while he clearly warns his readers that his main intention is to explain why there are Filipinos, especially the elites and non-poor, who do not only support but oppose pro-poor economic policies, attitudes which, for him, only hamstrung real development, he offers in the end seemingly

conclusive alternatives. This is problematic as it confuses sham causes of poverty with real ones. On the other, Bernardo's reluctance to come to grips with real causes of poverty as a result of his privileging of the social consciousness (i.e. pro-poor mindset) of the rich or non-poor as the key to poverty reduction has not only pushed real alternatives to the background but also "depolticized" the real agents of social transformation, that is, the poor people themselves. Thus, my take on the issue on poverty reduction in the Philippines begins where Bernardo ends. To speak very simply, while I agree with Bernardo that social consciousness plays out decisively in addressing the problem of poverty in the country, I argue that it has to be sought not in the consciousness of the rich or the non-poor but in the poor themselves, and that this consciousness needs to be pushed further to the point that it mobilizes them for radical political action. Let me briefly develop my position.

It might be worthwhile to remind ourselves here about the key intuition of Bernardo's paper. As we can see, the paper aims to investigate the nature and dynamics of poverty in the Philippines from the angle of social psychology, and argues that one of the reasons why poverty persists is that "pro-poor policies" have not been pushed by the rich or non-poor Filipinos. As a matter of fact, Bernardo holds that the social motives, beliefs, and attitudes of these privileged Filipinos make them more likely to oppose pro-poor policies. Bernardo then suggests some ways on how to target motives, beliefs, and attitudes that would make Filipinos become pro-poor. Here, Bernardo appears to be deeply influenced by Anthony F. Lemieux and Felicia Pratto's contention that poverty ultimately stems from social relations. Then, following Carlos Celdran who argues that the elites could have pulled the country out of poverty but failed to do so, Bernardo tasks himself on demonstrating how it could be practicably done by suggesting some alternatives that draw inspiration from social psychology. Although Bernardo acknowledges the fact that his thesis is just one of the many important factors that cause poverty, the manner upon which he presents his solutions to the problem appears to be conclusive; that is, he sees it that if we had only instilled in the mind of the Filipinos some kind of "pro-poor mindset," which I view as a kind of "social consciousness" (of the privileged Filipinos), then we could have solved poverty and social inequality in the country. To my mind, this is problematic not only because it runs the risk of oversimplifying the highly complex problem of poverty, but also because, as already mentioned, it confuses sham causes of poverty with real ones. More importantly, Bernardo's approach fails to analyze poverty from the needed socio-historical and politico-economic

perspectives, the proper context upon which we can make sense of the problem more meaningfully. As a result, Bernardo's social psychology of poverty suffers from practical and theoretical deficit that resulted in the offering of piecemeal solutions to the already deeply ingrained problem of poverty in the Philippines as well as the privileging of the rich and non-poor. For sure, social consciousness is crucial to national economic development; however, contrary to Bernardo's position, I argue that it has to be sought not from the privileged Filipinos but from the direct victims of injustice themselves that is, the poor and marginalized. This is precisely because the rich people do not only have the tendency to be elitist and self-serving, as Bernardo clearly demonstrates in his paper, but also because they will never fully understand the plight of the poor for the simple reason that they do not concretely experience poverty on their knees. As a matter of fact, we cannot expect the rich people to be "pro-poor" and push for "pro-poor policies" given that they are enjoying some kind of social leverage that they are afraid of losing. If we remind ourselves of the historical development of the welfare state in the West, certain pro-poor mindset was introduced not because the elites wanted to address poverty but simply because they were afraid of rebellion. In other words, such pro-poor mindset was not meant to really solve the problem of poverty and promote socio-economic equality but simply to appease the recalcitrant "poor," which resulted in the acquiescence and depoliticization of the poor themselves. I want to read Bernardo's social psychology of poverty from this vantage point.

### **WHAT THEN IS THE BEST ALTERNATIVE TO THE PROBLEM OF MASSIVE POVERTY IN THE PHILIPPINES?**

First, we have to remind ourselves that the kind of poverty that we know today emanates from the situation of "scarcity" in the olden times. In the distant past, human beings had the difficulty of finding the means of subsistence given that Nature had not provided them with the kind of structural and organic connection to the environment that was granted to other living beings. Thus, human beings had to work long and hard in order to survive in order to simply put food on the table, clothes on their skin, and shelter over their heads. And since, again, society in the past did not have enough means to support the life of its members without work on their part, it must see to it that the number of these members is restricted and their energies directed towards productive work. To me, this is the socio-historical context of the widely accepted view that the poor are "poor"

because they are lazy—because they do not work productively—one that is not captured in Bernardo's social psychology of poverty. However, as we can see, the advancement of science and technology has already successfully answered the problem of material necessity. In fact, scarcity is in theory overcome with modern production. Thus, we could rightly say that the advancement of science and technology has already put an end to material scarcity and that poverty could have been eliminated. But today's economic system of (over) production and lavish, and seemingly unlimited consumption, maintain the prevalence of a massive and unbending scarcity through the creation and valorization of artificial needs, which constitute a new justification for the old demand that working and consuming individuals obey and conform to the dictates of society. In the advanced industrial society, the procurement of basic needs is no longer a problem, but it is the manner in which these material needs are distributed and utilized. For how can we justify the prevalence of dire poverty in both developed and developing countries given the unprecedented achievements in science and technology? How can we make sense of scarcity amidst massive abundance even in modern societies? For sure, poverty, which is the historical form of "scarcity" specific to old civilizations, is a human creation. It is the direct result, albeit unintended, of the manipulation of the world's resources by the rich and powerful nations to their advantage. As Walden Bello rightly puts it, poverty and other related social problems have resulted more from the global economic framework that is imposed on developing countries by the dominant and powerful countries. In the case of the Philippines, like any other formerly colonized territories, material scarcity is compounded by the forces of economic globalization, such as the transnational corporations, IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization that demanded for the restructuring of the Philippine economy for their own advantage. To explain in great detail the reason why poverty can be ultimately traced back to economic globalization is not my concern in this short response to Bernardo, but I think it suffices to say at this point that the structural transformation of the Philippine economy as a result of the invasion of these forces of globalization is the root cause of poverty in the country. I argue that this should be addressed first before we can meaningfully talk about other factors that may have contributed to the problem of poverty such as corruption, overpopulation, management issues, and even social psychology of poverty.

Now, if poverty is a human creation--that is, a product of social and historical construction--then it can be fully eliminated. But because eliminating

poverty is a Herculean task, I do not pretend to possess the key that would finally resolve the problem. I believe that the best alternative begins with a clarification of the method to be used in diagnosing social pathology of poverty, rather than with offering prefab solutions. To be specific, in order to come up with practicable and historically informed means of addressing poverty, one needs to inquire thoroughly into the problem and understand the manner in which it arises. This is because a thorough understanding of the problem and its possible resolution can only be fully worked out through a holistic engagement with the problem per se. Thus, to respond to the social pathology of poverty without explaining the manner of its emergence in full, as Bernardo did, is to remain absolutely on the fringes. Bernardo's intentional focus on only one aspect of the highly complex problem of poverty in the Philippines, as already mentioned, not only obfuscates the problem but suppresses real alternatives. Bernardo's critique of the social pathology of poverty in the Philippines would have made more sense had it been focused on the analysis of the internal contradictions immanent in the problem itself, contradictions that have been compounded and entrenched by the forces of economic globalization. On a practical level, the theoretical insights that would have resulted from this analysis should enable the poor who are the direct victims of economic globalization and the real agents of development to take a very schematic view of the problem, which allows them to become conscious of their plight. I believe that this social consciousness is the key to real development and to poverty reduction in the Philippines, inasmuch as our full knowledge of the concrete historical situations of poverty in the Philippines would make the poor become disposed to radical political action that will finally lead to a collective radical action aimed at the transformation of this pathological society. And this task has to be worked out by the poor themselves as the real agents of social transformation. We may doubt the capability of the poor to liberate themselves from poverty, but this is only so if we remain to be politically naïve, if we remain elitist in our political outlook. If only the privileged Filipinos do not allow themselves to be blinded by their intellectual arrogance, then they would see hope in the millions of poor Filipinos who struggle for the recognition of their basic demands and deep-seated claims. Thus, the least that the privileged Filipino people can do is help politicize the poor and allow them to have more freedom to conceptualize and formulate the practicable alternatives for themselves rather than promote some kind of pro-poor mindset. This is precisely the reason why, as I argued above, that social consciousness has to be sought not from the rich and non-poor, as Bernardo would have us believe,

but from the poor themselves. This social consciousness, however, should not remain on the level of theory. It has to mobilize the poor for radical political action. Indeed, it is only through these politicized and empowered masses that we begin to witness the dawning of true human flourishing in the Philippines.

