

Visualizing Community: Images of Poverty in a Philippine Rural Community

Joseph Reylan Viray

Polytechnic University of the Philippines
jrbviray@pup.edu.ph

Raul Roland Sebastian

Polytechnic University of the Philippines
rrsebastian@pup.edu.ph

Nelson S. Baun

Polytechnic University of the Philippines
nsbaun@pup.edu.ph

Ronillo B. Viray

Pampanga Colleges/Department of Education, Philippines
josephronillo.viray@deped.gov.ph

Abstract

The study zeroed in on the perception of college students who are exposed to sights of poverty in their immediate environment. The student-participants were asked to provide their perception, understanding, and behaviour towards poverty using the photographs that they took on their own. In qualitative research practice, this methodology is called photo elicitation. It was revealed, among others, that the participants have shown negative perceptions about poverty. They strongly felt bad about each photograph that they took and what these images portrayed. The participants visualized their community and thereby weaved analyses and opinions that encroached on various philosophical and sociological theories. There are four interrelated dominant images that were drawn: exteriority image, dirt-poor image, victim-blaming image, and hand-to-mouth image.

Keywords: Philippines, photo elicitation, poverty, urban poor

INTRODUCTION

With 21.6% of the population below the national poverty line, the Philippines is in a very bad situation (Philippine Statistics Authority 2015). This number is a slight improvement of the past reports as the year 2006 shows 26.6% of poverty incidence. But compared to its South East Asian neighbours, the country is still lagging way behind. It shares the last spots with Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (23.2%) and Myanmar (25.6%) (Asian Development Bank 2016). Undoubtedly, poverty is one of the difficult and recurrent challenges that beset the country. And the positive economic performance (6.6%) reported in many surveys does not seem to have great impact in significantly reducing the poverty incidence (Asian Development Bank 2016).

The social irony is that, while approximately a quarter of the population is suffering from poverty, there are still two Filipino families that belong to top 40 Forbes Richest Family in Asia: the Zobels (37th) and the Aboitiz (39th). Also, the estimated accumulated assets of Philippine's richest individuals that belong to the top 10 of Forbes is estimated at 53 billion dollars (Blankfield 2016); while less than 25 million Filipinos barely earn Php 200,000 pesos in their annual income. Inarguably, there seems to be a palpable economic inequality in the country. While a very few is getting richer by the day, the greater majority is drowning in a deep quagmire of poverty.

Poverty and inequality are not one and the same social problem. They are closely related and are linked with each other but never identical. However, inequality fuels poverty as it prevents groups with lower social status from having access to productive resources and capital to sustain themselves.

Socialists and Marxists attribute the aforesaid phenomenon to the capitalist economic system. The ownership of the means of production, by those who-haves, dictates the economy (Goodwin, 2007). The capitalist class, by the sole virtue of their entitlement over the capital, controls how the economy runs. The system leaves a large portion of the society that is dependent on salaries and wages; while the moneyed class continues to accumulate huge wealth that capacitates itself to purchase more resources, financial assets, capital, and stocks. Here, the system allows the disparity to widen; and the cycle seems to be perpetual. This scenario drives the leftist organizations, desperate

and impatient, to advocate drastic changes through revolutions to shatter the existing status quo with a view of eliminating private property. The common objective of these advocacies is “the material transformation of the economic conditions of production” (Marx, 1904). By doing this, the entire economic system would (expectedly) change, which consequently allows equality to finally thrive.

It is the assumption of the researchers that what Marx and Engels did was that they interpreted and visualized their community/society using the available images of production and economy, exploitation and alienation of the labourers, political landscape, and the socio-cultural milieu of the time. The visualization that they did was neither through photographs nor graphic images, but through written texts and careful, keen, and meticulous observation of the live (actual) circumstances surrounding them. Of course, the technology of photography was already in existence during those times. However, the scholars choose their philosophical prowess to critically analyze and convey their powerful messages through their literary and intellectual skills to their captured audiences. From this kind of pure and theoretical sociology, this project takes flight and lands on visual sociology where the society and culture are analyzed using visual images and other visual dimensions of the social environment.

The Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature

The research is mostly anchored on the principle of social inequality particularly that which was proposed by Karl Marx and further explained and elaborated by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Other related concepts such as the following were also used to explain the research subject: Othering, Commodification, Victimization, and Ideological Apparatuses.

In Karl Marx’s discussions, the possession of capital is the root cause or the ultimate determinant of all types of social inequality (McLellan, 1977). The social division between the bourgeoisie (capitalists who possess and own the means of production) and the proletariat (members of the working class who sell labor for wages) is what constitutes the capitalist economic structure. This structure nurtures a state of inequality which has become acceptable and legitimate through cultural ideology. Even the proletariat becomes

willing to be in a subservient position compared to the position of the bourgeoisie (Andrew,1983).

The inequality is basically determined by the ownership of the means of production. Marx's idea is that, whoever owns the means of production controls the economic system. Conversely, whoever lacks the means of production is subject to the control of those who possess it. This is the economically deterministic model of inequality between classes as conceived by Marx. Clearly, Karl Marx saw ownership and control of wealth and material possessions as a means to measure the extent of inequality. In other words, the more control the bourgeoisie has over wealth, the less powerful the proletariat becomes.

Max Weber however, disagreed with Marx on his concept of social inequality. According to Weber, inequality is more complicated than what Marx thought of. For Weber, other factors may have been overlooked by Marx. Weber believes that inequalities may be defined according to class, status, and party (Gerth et al., 1948). Class inequalities can be rooted from the workings of economic systems. The role of wealth and private property is important in the widening of social divide.

Party inequalities are those which are produced, reproduced, and sustained by groups and organizations that tend to act according to their interests. Here, Weber conceived of not just two opposing groups but thinks of the rise of various middle classes as well. He suggested that there will be an increase of classes and social groups according to professional skills, educational skills, and qualifications. These classes may exert power over workers in the capitalist state.

Finally, inequalities can be brought about by status. Status may have impact on worth and/ or value of a specific group of people. Membership and non-membership to a group, for example, may have advantages and corresponding disadvantages. Those who belong to high status groups may have great opportunities in terms of income, employment, and advancement. Conversely, those who belong to low status groups may have poor income, less employment opportunities, and little chance at advancement.

Karl Marx believes that when the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are highly polarised with the former becoming ever richer

while the latter poorer, capitalism is leading to its eventual demise as it no longer maintains the gap. On the other hand, Weber believes in the growth of more social classes in capitalist society. Class would become dependent on lifestyles, chances, accents, habits, education, locality, and spending (Gerth et al., 1948). The rise of these middle classes would not necessarily lead to capitalism's end.

In the works of Emile Durkheim, social inequality is no longer taken as one concept. He saw two types: the internal inequality and the external inequality. External inequalities are those that are arbitrarily imposed on the individual by virtue of birth or acquired status. On the other hand, internal inequalities are those that are based on individual talent or achieved status (Durkheim, 1893). Apparently in Durkheim, the pre-industrial status of nobilities and commoners (also the other classes of the same nature in other societies) is culturally and socially imposed upon individuals that produced social external inequalities. These inequalities are beyond the control of the individual and transcend personal qualities. Contrarily, internal inequalities are within personal qualities and individual control. Here, Durkheim defines classes and inequalities primarily not according to wealth as thought of by Marx and partially, by Weber.

Ideological Apparatuses

Louis Althusser, a staunch follower of Karl Marx, suggested a very fine interpretation of Marx's theory. Althusser believes that there are two complimentary structures that make up the 'social whole'. He stated "Marx conceived the structure of every society as constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the 'unity' of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two 'levels' or 'instances': the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.)" (Althusser, 1971).

The economic base or the infrastructure is the status quo. In capitalist state, this refers to capitalism where the productive and the relations of production merged. This base is sustained by the superstructure which is divided into the political state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. The political state apparatus includes

the police, military, government, law and the bureaucracy; while the ideological is composed of, among others, religion, family, ethics, morality, and education.

The inequality that is brought about by the economic system is therefore nurtured and sustained by the state and ideological apparatuses. And complementarily, the superstructure is sustained by the infrastructure. For example, the minds of the poor or lower class are being conditioned to the normality of the state of affairs by the ideological apparatuses, despite the obvious exploitation and alienation that are abounding. Likewise, the state protects the system through the laws enacted by congress favouring the interests of the moneyed class or the capitalist class e.g wage law, oil price deregulation, etc.

On the other hand, the infrastructure supports the superstructure in various ways. For example, among others, the moneyed class sustains the religious and charitable activities of churches, supports educational institutions or (at times) owns the schools, and enters the political arena to protect their interests.

Othering

Othering as a philosophical concept, is exhaustively discussed in the area of feminist studies and is particularly pronounced in the works of Simone De Beauvoir. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), De Beauvoir claims that the concept of the other is as old and “original as the consciousness itself” (De Beauvoir, 1949, 24). The duality between Self and the Other is in fact present in most primitive societies and mythologies. De Beauvoir further notes that the distinction is not entirely anchored on the category of sexes and it was “not based on any empirical given” (24). The feminist philosopher even enumerated dualities that are apparent in some ancient myths like Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, Varuna-Mitra, Lucifer-God, Left-Right, auspicious-inauspicious, etc. Quite clearly, in most of her dualities, De Beauvoir shows the absence of feminine element. This only means that the concept is not solely a feminists’ construct but “a fundamental category of the human thought” (24). “No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself,” (24) she further illustrates. Here, De Beauvoir shows her partiality towards the “Hegelian dialectic of identification and distantiation in the encounter of the Self with some

Other in his master-slave dialectic” (Brons, 2015, 69). In the dialectic of identification, self-consciousness sees the other as both self and not self. Contradictorily, in the dialectic of distantiation, self-consciousness does not see the other as essential being; it sees the other as negative and not-self (Brons, 2015).

To supplement De Beauvoir’s discussion on Othering, Lajos Brons (2015) offered two dimensions of the concept. First is the one which affirms the superiority of the self and the inferiority of the other. Second is that which creates distance between self and the other by “means of a dehumanizing over-inflation of otherness” (72). The other in the second dimension is “not inferior but radically alien” (72). Both dimensions, however, result to the same effect.

The paper is consistent with the direction that was taken by Apurv Chauhan and Juliet Foster (2014). It shows how Othering plays in socio-economic divisions. Apparently, the economically endowed classes or those which either identify themselves with this class or distance themselves from the poor, perceive their less fortunate counterparts as Other. This phenomenon will be labelled heretofore as Othering. Chauhan and Foster’s research indicates how Othering becomes a threat in resolving poverty in the world using as bases are the representations made by English newspapers on poverty.

Commodification

Commodification is a theoretical concept which describes a phenomenon that basically treats all aspects of social life as commodities that are offered in the market for sale. This includes labor, values, bodily organs, sexual services, knowledge, and others which can be bought and sold. This means that these aspects of social life are made exchangeable through the market. Karl Marx employs this concept to portray how the capitalist class controls and manipulates the proletariat by buying ‘labor’ that the latter offers for sale. Commodification drives the capitalists to accumulate more wealth to gain more capital and to build up more buying power; to buy more labor. Consequently, allowing the capitalist to cement its hold over the means of production.

In the abstract level, commodification is within the level of consciousness that qualitatively equates something with money. This

phenomenon dissolves the basic quality of the thing like values (etc.) and makes it commensurable with money (Castree, 2003).

The problem with commodification, among others, is that it creates a scenario where it becomes a gauge of those who-haves and have-nots. It becomes a distinguishing mark. For instance, because almost all aspects of social life are commodified, those who possess great buying power push those who have less to the margins. This phenomenon broadens the social cleavages and allows the richer to accumulate more wealth while those who have none become more distant and poorer.

Victimization

There is a dichotomy in blame attribution when it comes to public perceptions on the causes of poverty and inequality. Individual on one hand and social structure on the other hand. The first in the dichotomy is grounded in the principle of liberalism and in the “belief in individual rights and responsibility” (Wright, 1993). And the second is grounded in some societal conditions wherein the individual has less control over such as unjust social structure, educational availability, lack of employment opportunities, and economic conditions (Wright, 1993).

In the United States for example, Americans tend to view widespread public problems as largely personal and individual. Those who belong in the upper socioeconomic positions are more inclined to hold the individuals responsible for their failings than their middle-class counterparts. According to Wright (1993, 1-16), “Public support for the individual explanation of poverty, and the concomitant tendency to blame the victims, has neither developed nor been sustained in a social vacuum. Its tenets have been, and continue to be, clearly articulated in both social science and popular literature as well as in college classrooms”.

Method: Photography as a Qualitative Research Method

In the late 80s and early 90s, some social scientists began to offer refinements on qualitative research methods especially on verbal interviews. Some methods to generate data include “show and tell” (Tammivaara and Enright, 1986), puppet show (Beardslee, 1986),

and group interviews rather than one-on-one interviews (Eder and Fingerson, 2003). Others started integrating visual methods of data collection and generation such as photography, sketching, drawing, etc. with their traditional gathering methods like interviews and discussions (See Cappello, 2005).

Visual methods, in the general level, use images gathered and gleaned from drawing, collage, painting, video/film, photography, graffiti, cartoons, vandalism, sculpture, and advertising materials to understand and interpret the visual object themselves or some specific social phenomena. “Researchers use these methods to create knowledge” (Glaw et al., 2001, 2). This new approach to qualitative research has originated from ethnography (anthropology and sociology) (Barbour 2014).

Nowadays, the method of research which uses photography is known as photo elicitation. This visual method of research is user-friendly and inexpensive as almost all mobile phones can capture and generate photographic images in seconds. “[b]y using photographs and playing with content (what is in the photo) and process (how photos were presented), researchers can probe participants to discuss social relationships” (Epstein et al., 2006, 2). Epstein et al. (2006, 2) also stress that photo elicitation uses photographs to generate “comments, memory, and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview”.

The use of photo elicitation in social science research allows and enables people to talk and discuss their ideas on things represented by photographic images more freely and in different ways. For example, photographs can manifest the participants’ knowledge and they can explain their ideas, thoughts, experiences and feelings more freely without hesitation in terms of metaphors (Hatten, Forin, and Adams, 2013). Hatten et. al claim, “Lived experience can be difficult to articulate because it can be an unconscious process. Photos help to draw these ideas out into the open and get beyond the limitations of the spoken or written word. The portions of our brains that process images are evolutionarily older, which means that using images is a way to access the deeper recesses of our subconscious” (par. 5-6). As Carlsson (2001, 8) opines, “photos make it easy to represent a situation and how it relates to a phenomenon—they are not just “of” something but also “about” something”.

Photo elicitation has been used in a variety of approaches. One approach is to give and supply the participants with pre-captured photographs and thereafter ask them to use the same photos as references for their responses and reflections. The benefits of this approach “include not relying on participants to follow through on the requirement to bring their own photos which adhere to assigned categories; having control over being able to generalize the study’s results; and ensuring a baseline for comparison. However, this version of the method limits two of the main benefits of photo elicitation in general: empowerment and interviewees’ self-reflexivity” (Carlsson, 2001, 8).

In the foregoing research, the researchers decided to employ the first two approaches and disregarded the last approach. The researchers assumed that the most scientific way of limiting and delimiting the research coverage is to filter the materials or images to be made part of the discussions and focus-group interviews.

Participants were either made to take photos of poverty-stricken areas of the municipality on their mobile phones or were invited to participate in a focused-group-discussion facilitated at the Pampanga Colleges. The participants who contributed images to the discussion mostly started the discussions. Through a semi-structured facilitation, those participants who did not contribute images in the discussions shared their comments, perceptions, and ideas about the images taken.

There are 18 boys and 12 girls who participated in the discussions for the data gathering. Based on the profile, majority of the participants are senior high school students, and a few are from the College department of three Pampanga schools in the municipalities of Masantol and Macabebe.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following interrelated images were drawn from the data that were collected during the focus group discussion (FGD) that has been conducted among the participants on August 16, 2017. The discussion was free-flowing and the facilitator tried to draw all the interpretations, ideas and attitudes of the participants about the subjects and the overall composition and themes of the photographs shown to them in

sets. Likewise, the participants were also asked, albeit obliquely, about poverty in the general level.

Exteriority Image and Othering

Exteriority image was manifested by the majority of the participants. They detached themselves from the poor subjects of the photographs. The concept of ‘*Othering*’ is strongly suggested by the way the informants interpreted the photographs. In other words, informants believe that “Whatever the photos convey does not relate to them”. For example, some of the implicit responses during the focus group discussion were: ‘*we are educated*’ and ‘they are not’; ‘*they are dirty*’ and ‘we are not’ (among others). A participant even explicitly said, “*I felt very fortunate.*” Another participant emphasized that “... *napakaswerte natin kasi tayo nag aaral. Kasi tayo di natin kailangang mamalimos sa daan* (...we are very lucky because we are in schools. We don’t need to beg)”. The participants described poverty and so the individuals were drowned into it as objects other than themselves. Apparently, expressions from their faces, enunciations, mannerisms, and the overall demeanours that they had shown when talking about poverty manifested an utter antipathy.

Theoretically at least, *Othering* according to Crang (2005, 61) is where “identities are set up in an unequal relationship”. In this process, individuals tend to construct their identity from the most desirable traits that they possess; and simultaneously, declare the out-group (others) as their opposites because of their observable undesirable characteristics. *Othering* thus “sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit” (Brons 2015, 70).

Consequently, *Othering* results to exteriority image—an image which is formed by distinguishing the inner (interior image) from what is outside or from what is different. This exteriority image is a sort of like a psychological ploy in order to elevate themselves (participants) into a plane which is higher than those considered poor. By detaching themselves from the poor, participants felt that they are of a class higher than the subjects of the photos. Apparently, exteriority here also means superiority.

Othering in poverty studies is never new. For example, in a study which was conducted in the United Kingdom by Chauhan and Foster (2013), it was found out that generally in UK Media, poverty is shown as distant from the general society; presenting it as the problem of the other. Using their language, poverty is an 'orphan phenomenon' (par.1). Another study alerts the society about the possible danger of *Othering*. It creates a hegemonic narrative where poor individuals are stigmatized and punished. It likewise nurtures social distancing and in many respects, incubates social cleavages. Hence, counter narratives like "structural/contextual counter-narrative, the agency/resistance counter-narrative and the counter-narrative of voice and action" are highlighted to challenge this hegemony (Krumer-Nevo and Orly, 2010).

In the present study, the participants divorced themselves from the subjects of the photographs by uttering words like uneducated (*walang pinag-aralan*), idle (*walang ginagawa, naghihintay ng grasya*), dirty (*marumi*), poor (*mahirap*), (low income) *mahina ang kita*, and hopeless. The participants during the focus-group discussion were trying to project themselves as individuals that do not belong to the subjects they described. At times, to show their separation from the subjects, they even sounded preachy such when one quipped, "*Kasi nakikita naman sa kanyang pangangatawan na kaya nyang magtrabaho. Dapat tinutulungan nya ang kanyang asawa. Para hindi sila laging isang kahig isang tuka* (We can see from his physique that he is able to work. He should help his wife so that they can alleviate their status". Another participant even suggested that being idle is a by-product of being uneducated, he remarked, "...if you are an educated person, you cannot afford to be idle longer than 30 minutes, probably having an idle time is actually for you to take a rest. If you are educated, you will feel equipped to do something while waiting for [your] husband. You can generate [do] some activities that actually generate money". Likewise, other than being preachy, the participants easily passed judgment on the subjects. One participant, judging the subjects' situation, enthused, "*Hopeless!*". This participant asserted that the future of these poor subjects as well as their descendants is bleak.

Clearly, the subjects of the photographs are 'othered' according to the following themes education, economic condition, physical appearance, traits, morality/values, and destiny. In other words, the

in-group (participants) differ from the out-group (subjects) according to these categories and/ or themes.

Accordingly, *othering* is a potentially damaging perspective that any member of society may hold regarding poverty. When this perspective is translated into practice or when antipathy towards those in the economic margins sets into motion, the problem becomes complicated and difficult to address. The participants, in the study, *othered* the subjects of the photographs and the poverty that they represent according to the following themes: education, economic condition, physical appearance, traits, morality/values and destiny. Hence, there is a tendency, at least in the case of the participants, that poverty will be taken as a problem so remote and solving it is not immediately necessary. Here, there likely would be a propensity for indifference, which may even more cause socio-economic damage to the present research locale.

The damage may be caused by this politicized superior-inferior polarity. Meaning to say, when one group considers the other as inferior or vice versa, the possibility of oppression and social division is even more likely. Dominelli (2002), cautioned the society about the marginalization of the '*other*' especially those considered inferior and deviant. In the case of poverty, social exclusion becomes the rule rather than the exception. Ironically, even when governments push for inclusion, programs still breed social exclusion.

There is an important take away from the aforementioned discussion---that is solutions to end poverty should not all originate from welfare states or governments. Individual perspectives towards poverty or how it is viewed as a social malaise may be crucial. A collective acceptance and ownership of the problem may perhaps be a good start to end the problem. Poverty problem should not be looked at as a problem of the '*other*'; but a problem that belongs to all despite one's comfort, class, and economic status. It is a social disease that needs to be cured collectively.

Dirt-Poor Image and Commodification

The FGD participants were united in interpreting the photographs of the poor subjects as reflective of a grand social malaise.

The photographs represent poverty as the very garbage of the society. The participants seemed to indicate that a poor individual is always dirty, untidy and/or uncleaned. Participants used the words like *magulo* (disorganized), *kalat-kalat* (cluttered), and shabby to describe the poor conditions of the subjects. Most of the themes that their statements are subsumed under are the following: disorganized, poor hygiene/health, and dirty environs. In other words, the general impression is that a poor individual cannot in anyway be capable of being neat, well kept and organized.

This image, however, deserves rethinking. This is an impression that is generally accepted but not always valid. Economically challenged individuals can still be tidy and orderly. Because being clean and in good order does not require much wealth to do. The image perhaps comes into general public impression because of the highly *commodified* society. The general tendency is to equate hygiene, clean, tidy, and organized with some products or commodities such as alcohol, soap, medicines, shampoo, signature clothes, well-designed houses, manicured garden and etc. The main driver of this mentality is the capitalistic state. It creates '*false needs*' as claimed by Herbert Marcuse (1968).

Thus, the stigma which is associated with being poor is always borne from the incapacity to buy these commodities. Purchase of these products may free an individual from shameful labels. Hence, poverty is not only about social exclusion as discussed above. It is also about *commodification*.

Commodification is an inequality exacerbating force (Grusky and Hill, 2017). The rising *commodification*, when coupled with continuous increase in income inequality, aggravates poverty. In other words, it stigmatizes those who are not capable of buying certain products and labels them as poor, dirty, deprived and unorganized. While those who have the capacity to avail the commodities construct an identity that characterizes them as rich, clean, endowed, and organized. Again, this phenomenon widens the social divide.

Karl Marx calls this phenomenon as 'commodity fetishism'. This concept is the core of Marx's theories of value and economic system (Rubin, 2008). This phenomenon starts from the abstract or subjective (economic value) into objective value that people believe

to have real, concrete and intrinsic value. In the study, the respondents apparently were influenced so much by the forces of *commodification*. Their perspective seemed to be so narrow that they have already stigmatized the poor subjects as dirty, disorganized, unhygienic and is surrounded with dirty environments. Of course, the participants' frame of reference is limited to the photographs provided; but there is a general impression that they have nurtured this image even before the focus group discussion was conducted as evidence by their answers. For example, one speculated that the clothes worn by the subjects are not signature and said with vigor and certainty, "*definitely not, ukay-ukay po!*". This is despite the fact that there was no hint or indication that can be drawn from the photograph about the brand of the cloth.

David Gordon during the *Expert Group Meeting on Youth Development Indicators* at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (Gordon 2005) suggested that one of the indicators of severe poverty is the severe deprivation of sanitation facilities—e.i. no access to a toilet of any kind in the vicinity of their dwelling.

This indicator was observed in the data and in some of the photographs taken. For example, an unhesitant participant claimed that "*They have no comfort rooms*". Quite obviously, the absence of comfort rooms (toilets) and the possible low immunity of children from diseases due to poor sanitation in the slums terribly disheartened the participants. From their perspective, this kind of life is really a cause for both abhorrence and sympathy. "*Nakakaawa. Nakakainis.*(Pitiful; Annoying) ", one participant emphatically stressed.

Access to quality health and sanitation services is unfortunately *commodified*. This is notwithstanding the efforts of welfare governments to provide these services for free. The high cost of medicines, skyrocketing prices of hospital and medical services, and privatization of water distribution are just a few of the evidence of this *commodification*. In the Philippines, many private hospitals are now being acquired by big corporations owned by tycoons and magnates (Flores, 2008). These continued acquisitions of hospitals by profit-makers definitely translates to increased cost of medical services thereby further incapacitating the poor to have access. The same also holds true in the case of water distribution, which is a crucial key to basic sanitation. The rising cost of water distribution considerably limits the access of many households. In

2010 report by the National Statistical Coordination Board for Millennium Development Goals, it was found out that there are only 80.2% of Filipino households that have access to water. Of this percentage with access to water from formal providers, only 44 % are connected to the safest and most convenient sources of water supply. Water Districts, which are supposed to cover local territories like the research locale, also lagged behind in coverage and performance at 38.8% (Philippine Association of Water Districts, 2010).

To restate, commodification, as above discussed, contributes immensely to the dirt-poor image that the participants derived from the subjects and compositions of the photographs. As a phenomenon, commodification drives poverty and widens social cleavages.

Victim-Blaming Image and the Just World Hypothesis

Individuals who are at the bottom of the economic ladder tend to put the blame upon themselves. They always attribute all the reasons why they are in such a forlorn condition to their own choices, frailties and weaknesses. They believe that their own poverty sprung from their own laziness; their own lack of education. These are cases of self-blaming. In social psychology, self-blaming is a psychological process where an individual attributes his/her misfortune (brought by a crime or an unfortunate stressful event or situation like poverty) to himself/herself (Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

On the other side, however, another related concept is called victim-blaming. This is where the victims of the crime or (in this case) a dire situation are blamed for the unfortunate circumstances that they are in. The poor themselves, for example, are considered to have contributed to their own poverty. This concept is entirely different from self-blaming because the former starts from the inner cognition of the victim; while the latter comes from the perception of the society about the victims.

Both self-blaming and victim-blaming originate from the same supposition. This is called the *Just-World Hypothesis* (Furnham, 2003). This fallacious theory simply holds that one gets what he deserves (Grinnell, 2016). The phenomenon inculcates the idea that because of

one's own frailties, weakness, and deeds the stressful situation (crime, poverty, etc), an otherwise inexplicable injustice, is rationalized.

In poverty studies, the belief that the victims (poor) are at least partially responsible for what befell them is a very popular position (Grinnell, 2016). In the present study, victim-blaming were deducted from the FGD. The participants used the words like "*Walang masisisi kundi sila* (No one to blame but them)", "*Kawalan ng Pangarap* (Absence of goals)", "*Umaasa* (Dependency)", "*Nagpapabaya sa pagaaral* (Devalues Education)", "*Droga* (Drugs)" at "*Yosi* (*Cigars*)". These words are here categorized according to the following themes: indolence, crime and substance abuse, and no sense of responsibility (irresponsible). The mindset of the participants is that, the situation into which these subjects are drowned is of their own making. Nobody is responsible for their plight, but the poor subjects themselves. They brought poverty upon themselves.

Marxist philosophy, contrary to victim blaming's underlying principles, believes that poverty is not a product man's decision and choices. Marx claims that, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx, 2019/1852, 5).

Also in Marxism, though implicitly, victim blaming exonerates the state and the capitalist system as it separates the individual from the entire system. Victim blaming separates the individual from the system. It attributes poverty entirely to the choices of the individuals, which thereby blurs the social and economic factors brought about by capitalism. By highlighting individual factors, the system and the state are absolved of responsibility. This is exactly what the bourgeoisie wants to impress upon and cultivate in the consciousness of the individual-worker-subjects. It tries to develop a consciousness that tolerates, accepts, legitimizes, endorses, fosters, and even protects the capitalistic system and the social inequalities attendant thereto.

Economic individualism and the just world fallacy, are the anchors of victim blaming, that legitimize poverty. In Marx's philosophy

poverty is caused by social inequalities or uneven distribution of wealth (Peet, 1975). Consequently, poverty's major cause (inequality) is also logically and particularly legitimized. Arguably, this legitimation avoids the genesis of something drastic like revolution or proletariat-led social transformation.

Hand-to-Mouth Image

Hand-to-Mouth is an idiomatic expression which refers to a situation of those in poor communities where they only satisfy their immediate needs such as food, modest shelter and clothing due to their inability to afford other refinements. This idiom is also a concept commonly associated with those who are working so hard and yet their wage and (total) earning seem to be inadequate to sustain a decent life. The Filipino counterpart of this idiom is *isang kahig at isang tuka* -- a derogatory remark that describes the situation of individuals plunged into poverty.

Hollander in one of his books requites Marx: "Since the working-class lives from hand-to-mouth, it buys as long as it has the means to buy" (Hollander, 2008, 72). The working class limits its survival to its buying power. Once its buying power diminishes, so too its chances of survival. The sad thing about this scenario is that the working class accepts this set-up as a natural phenomenon. And that the exploitation and abuses they suffer are just normal in a capitalist system. For instance, the garbage pickers (shown in the subject photographs) do not realize the exploitation/alienation they suffer as the buyers (junkshops) of their *kalakal* (junks) earn exorbitant profit from their hard labor. This reality in fact upset one participant and emotionally said, "It saddens our hearts to see this people trying to live a decent life and they are not being paid accordingly based on their capability and it's just sad".

One of the themes that emerged in the FGD is the work-survival paradox. This paradox suggests that an individual must work hard to survive; but working hard in an environment that is not healthy and conducive opens up risky possibilities which may lessen the individual's chances of survival. Therefore, the unsanitary conditions in the dumpsite rendered the pickers to have "*mahinang* (weak) *immune system...*", as one participant conjectured. But there seems to be no choice for the

poor, as one participant said “*Kung hindi kikilos ang asawa wala silang makakain* (If the wife does not do something, they would not eat)”.

The FGD suggests that poverty in the research locale flourishes because of the attitude of complacency. Those who are considered poor remain poor because of their perception that life is just a simple work-eat cycle. Meaning to say, they do not set goals far beyond eating. They are not, however, at fault in acquiring this attitude. Their perception and attitude are socially constructed as the capitalist system with both the ideological and the political apparatuses instilled this complacency in their minds. The poor individuals are made to believe, for example, that only those who are literate and born from middle class families could dream and that the current economic system is working and should not be disrupted otherwise their conditions would even worsen.

Apparently, Marx’s philosophy understands the plight of the working class and how the capitalist class aggravates this plight.

Finally, this hand-to-mouth image as generated from the FGD confirms the participants understanding of what is being poor and what is being wealthy. Being poor means barely surviving. No other refinements but just the needs of the body. On the other hand, being wealthy is always having excesses and over refinements.

CONCLUSION

The first image that was drawn from the photographs coupled with the FGD with the informants is the exteriority image. Exteriority image was made clear to most of the participants. They detached themselves from the poor subjects of the photographs. Also, the concept of ‘*Othering*’ is strongly suggested by the way the informants interpreted the photographs. In other words, “Whatever the photos convey does not relate to them”.

The participants describe poverty and the individuals drowned into it as other. Expressions from their faces, enunciations, mannerisms and the overall demeanors that they had shown as they talked about poverty manifested an utter antipathy. This is manifestly ‘*othering*’. The participants divorced themselves from the subjects of the photographs by uttering words like uneducated (*walang pinagalaran*), idle (*walang*

ginagawa, naghihintay ng grasya), dirty (*marumi*), poor (*mahirap*), *mahina ang kita* (inadequate income), and hopeless.

The second image is dirt-poor image. The FGD participants were united in interpreting the photographs of the poor subjects as reflective of a grand social malaise. The photographs represent poverty as garbage of the society. The participants seemed to indicate that a poor individual is always dirty, untidy and/or uncleaned. Participants used the words like *magulo* (disorganized), *kalat-kalat* (cluttered), shabby and shanties to describe the poor conditions of the subjects.

The image perhaps, comes into general public impression because of the highly *commodified* society. The general tendency is to equate hygiene, clean, tidy and organized with some products or commodities such as alcohol, soap, medicines, shampoo, signature clothes, well-designed houses, manicured garden and etc. The main driver of this mentality is the capitalistic state. It creates 'false needs' as claimed by Herbert Marcuse.

The third image is victim-blaming. Individuals who are at the bottom of the economic ladder tend to put the blame upon themselves. They always attribute all the reasons why they are in such a forlorn condition to their own choices, frailties, and weaknesses. They believe that their own poverty sprung from their own laziness, their own lack of education. These are cases of self-blaming. In social psychology, self-blaming is a psychological process where an individual attributes his/her misfortune (brought by a crime or an unfortunate stressful event or situation like poverty) to himself/herself.

In the present study, victim-blaming accounts were deducted from the FGD. The participants used the words like: "*Walang masisisi kundi sila*", "*Kawalan ng Pangarap*", "*Umaasa*", "*Nagpapabaya sa pagaaral*", "*Droga*" at "*Yosi*". These words are hereby categorized according to the following themes: indolence, crime and substance abuse, and no sense of responsibility (irresponsible). The mindset of the participants is that the situation into which these subjects are drowned is of their own making. Nobody is responsible for their plight; but the poor subjects themselves. They brought poverty upon themselves.

Marxist philosophy, contrary to victim blaming's underlying principles, believes that poverty is not a product man's decision and

choices. Marx claims that, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”

And the last image that was drawn is the hand-to-mouth image. Hand-to-Mouth is an idiomatic expression which refers to a situation of those in poor communities where they only satisfy their immediate needs such as food, modest shelter and clothing due to their inability to afford other refinements. This idiom is also a concept commonly associated with those who are working so hard and yet their wage and (total) earning seem to be often inadequate to sustain a decent life. The Filipino counterpart of this idiom is *isang kahig at isang tuka*-- a derogatory remark that describes the situation of individuals plunged into poverty.

One of the themes that emerged in the FGD is the *work-survival paradox*. This paradox suggests that, an individual must work hard to survive; but working hard in an environment that is not healthy and conducive opens up risk possibilities which may lessen the individual's chances of survival. Therefore, the unsanitary conditions in the dumpsite rendered the pickers to have “*mahinang immune system...*”, as one participant conjectured. But there seems to be no choice for the poor, as one participant said “*Kung hindi kikilos ang asawa wala silang makakain*”.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is a product of a research study which is funded by the Institute for Culture and Language Studies, Office of the Vice President for Research, Extension and Development, Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

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