

AN EXPLORATION INTO SOME DOMINANT FEATURES OF FILIPINO SOCIAL BEHAVIOR¹

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The paper explores some dominant features of Filipino social behavior using a symbolic interactionist perspective. Specifically, the paper attempts to analyze the Filipino's *personalism, intrusion, privacy, and submissiveness, and the concepts of success and failure.* The analysis is predicated on the idea that behavior is to a large extent determined by the sociocultural environment.

This paper will attempt to explore some dominant features of Filipino social behavior from a social psychological point of view. Our view is predicated upon the idea that behavior comes from such an environment. The human being should not be viewed, however, simply as a recipient of socio-cultural contents alone but also as an effective contributor to their formation and transformation. Society, as we shall view it, is symbolically organized and is only comprehensible and meaningful in terms of ideas symbolized in behavior. Hence, in order to understand society, we must know the role of ideas in human behavior. Ideas are usually developed and transmitted mainly through the medium of language. Consequently, much of the shaping of human behavior is done through the use of its related symbols. An important component of symbol is meaning.

In human society, a symbol is meaningful when it leads to a purposeful behavior. For instance, when a person wants something, he has to organize his behavior symbolically in terms of his particular need. The expression of this need through symbols is a function of learning. Through a series of rewards and punishments, he learns to associate certain

symbols with certain meanings. In time, he learns to behave in a certain manner because such behavior brings about a desired response from others. Through a similar process, symbols and their corresponding meanings are transmitted and received in society. So, the entire spectrum of human symbols are constructed deliberately to help man confront and surmount the varying demands of the physical and socio-cultural environment. The entire network of values and norms in society are symbolized through concepts rendered meaningful as they are instrumental to the achievement of man's goals. In other words, man lives in a symbolic reality created over a period of time by him. Any member of a given society must be socialized and the entire process is not only done through standard reward and punishment but more importantly through the medium of language. The ultimate purpose of the process is to make the individual fully conscious that the most effective way he can relate to others is through symbolic means. Concomitant to the understanding of symbol is another component of behavior, the act of interpretation. Interpretation however is double-edged. Interacting individuals are engaged in reciprocal interpretation of symbols; my interpretation should parallel those of others. This means that our behavior is not an automatic response; it must be organized meaningfully so that it is not only comprehensible to us but also to others. For instance, a

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● baby does not know that a certain facial expression brings about a pleasant response from others. However, those around him would read and label such expression as a smile and they will correspondingly smile back at the child. This interaction response will reinforce the child's behavior who eventually learns the conceptual aspects of such a behavior. When the child learns the word "smile", it will readily ● respond accordingly.

As we mature in society our symbolic repertoire expands together with its meaning components. What is crucial here is that our concept of meaning is not uniquely ours but they are shared with others. Hence, when I show a clenched fist, such a symbol is not only meaningful to me but is assumed to be meaningful to others. In view of this, most of our gestures undergo a process of inner interpretation which, in general, takes into consideration their meaning for others. ●

For a man to be able to relate to others in a meaningful manner, he must learn the symbols of the community. He must be able to engage in symbolic "communion" with them. This makes our reality a "taken-for-granted" one. Consider for instance our idea of a restaurant. "Restaurant" symbolizes a place where we can eat. When we enter a restaurant and sit down, the waiter takes it for granted that we are there to order something. Hence he approaches us, gives us the menu, and asks for our order. The same thing is true of a "bus". When we get in the bus, the conductor approaches us, asks where we are going, and gives us the ticket for the distance we are going to travel. Generally speaking, both situations are "taken for granted" which means that they are comprehensible to most social participants. Being in such a situation, there are certain specific gestures that must be acted out. Not any behavior will do because if this happens, confusion will result. Suppose we enter a restaurant and when the waiter approaches us, we ask him to sit down and request for his order. This will be a clear violation of a "taken-for-granted" reality. The waiter will be confused and may

not know how to react to the violation. Hence, purposeful action can be carried out successfully in social relationship only when there is symbolic communion. Furthermore since symbols are meaningful, they are behaviorally constraining. Whether one is going to carry out an action or not depends on what such action means not only for the person but also for others. Rules as such are not behaviorally constraining. They become so, only when they are accepted to assume particular meanings.

We can say that any component of the physical-social environment needs to be symbolized by man in order to carry out human affairs. Objects such as houses, cars, jewelries etc. have meanings because men give them symbolic meanings. In fact, the sociologists have labelled many such items as having status components. Our physical environment too is continuously shaping our symbolic behavior and, in turn, we are shaping our physical environment in terms of man's purpose in life.

On the basis of the foregoing general theory of symbolic behavior, we shall now look into the following features of Filipino social behavior which are governed by symbols that are the creation of his culture: (1) *Personalism*, (2) *Intrusion*, (3) *Privacy*, (4) *Concept of Success and Failure*, and (5) *Submissiveness*.

1. *Personalism*. The most dominant symbolic feature of the Filipino social behavior is personalism. It means that in any kind of activity he undertakes, what is involved is not only a segment of his personality but the whole of it. For him, there is no separation between task and emotional involvement. His whole *pagkatao* is enmeshed in the activity. For instance, in a classroom situation, a question directed at the teacher is oftentimes taken by the teacher as an attempt of the student to challenge his capability as a teacher. In other words, it is perceived as an attempt on the part of the student to challenge the academic competence of the teacher and not simply intended as a sincere and critical question of an interested student. In fact, it seems there is some

basis for such an interpretation on both sides. We hear students after such a confrontation say that: "Naisahan mo si Sir." The obverse is also true. We find that many students do not dare ask any question because of the fear that others will laugh at him (Mapagtawanan ng iba). Such a situation is echoed in many other similar situations — from interpersonal relationship to bureaucracy. Most especially in many of our organizations, we find office heads being called Kuya, Ate, Manang, Manong, Tio, Tita, Tatay, Nanay, etc. The entire spectrum of social relationship in the Philippines is dominated by personalistic relationship. The practice not only creates a feeling of being within one family but, like in a family situation, tends to cushion whatever unpleasantness may be caused by reprimands. We have not yet reached a point in our socio-cultural development where we can segregate subjective involvement from objective involvement. This leads us to another feature of our social behavior.

2. *Intrusion.* *Intrusion* is an act of trying to discover the reasons for an individual action. It is not enough that an action is taken for what it is worth, but most generally, the basis or reason for such act is asked of the person. In our culture, this *intrusion* is better known as "pakikialam" although a closer examination would reveal it to be "pagmamalasakit." In general, when we meet friends and associates, it is not enough that we greet each other; our tendency is not only to ask where a person is going but to inquire why. Also, when we see a friend in a strange place, we not only exchange pleasantries but also ask what he is doing there. "Ano ang ginagawa mo rito?" When we go shopping and happen to meet a friend, again we go beyond mere pleasantries. We generally ask what was bought and would not hesitate to tell our friend that he made a mistake in buying the item as he can get the same for less in another store. When we see that a friend is in a bad mood, we inquire why he is in such a condition, or "Bakit ganyan ang hitsura mo, mukha kang nalugi." We take it that when we intrude into another person's affair, we are actually showing a deep concern (pagmamala-

sakit) for him or her. In our culture, it is expected that if two individuals are friends, they must show deep personal concern for each other and this is the basic link that cements their mutual identification. Hence to intrude into one's behavior is a legitimate expectation; otherwise, there is no genuine intimacy.

3. *Privacy.* By *privacy* we mean the opportunities made available to a person to be left to himself and be free from intrusion of others. Since we are personalistic and concerned with the welfare of others, we are often not given enough opportunity to experience *privacy*. If we are well-dressed, friends will inquire where we are going; if we receive a gift, we are asked where it came from. Not infrequently, friends would ask us to open the gift so they would know what is in it. At home, often our parents would ask us where we came from and what we did, etc. When we receive guests at home, guests do not simply stay in the living room but freely move around the house. We may not even pay any particular attention to our appearance as we do not make any moves to put on a shirt when we have visitors. It is considered alright to receive them with only our undershirt on. In many Philippine communities, we find people walking around in pajamas, briefs, and sometimes wrapped in a towel or *sarong*. Even physical space is, in general, not bounded by fences to indicate private ownership and what is usually done by people is to find shortcuts by cutting through them to get to their destination in the fastest possible manner. It is a common experience in many of our communities that children and others are allowed to use and play in their neighbor's private property. Even if an area is fenced, especially if the materials used for fencing are not made of strong quality, people will eventually break it down for trespass. In fact, the idea of fencing one's property is often not directly intended to bar passageway of people but only to indicate the property limits of a given family. In view of this, the moment a family surrounds their property with solid fence, the general reaction will be that they are indifferent to others and that they do not belong to the community at

- all. In fact, it is often the case that the degree of privacy a family has from others corresponds to their degree of distance from others. This means that the more distant one is from the community, the greater is the likelihood that physical separateness is emphasized. Thus, the community will view the family as "suplado," "mapagnataas," "matapobre," "parang ibang tao," "parang hindi taga-rito," etc. In other words, an index of belongingness to the community is the lack of geographical barriers between private properties. The entire barrio geography is perceived to belong to all and everyone has the right to use any area in the community if the need for its use arises. We wish to add here that even amorous affairs are hardly private affairs in many of our communities. We know who is having an affair with whom. We also know how many *queridas* a man has. Furthermore, personal characteristics of residents are widely known. Personal hygiene like taking a bath is not private in many places since many homes do not have bathrooms and people have to take a bath in public places. Relieving oneself of a personal discomfort, most especially among the males, does not require any privacy at all.

- 4. *Concept of Success and Failure.* In any endeavor of man, there is always the probability that either the action is a success or a failure. In either case, there is a need to account for the result. Thus, when a person becomes successful in any one undertaking there is always a basis for it. The same is true for failure. Although this is true, this is not the general case for the Filipino. When he is successful in some undertakings, the most common thing for him to say is he is "suwerte." When he fails, he is "malas." This is true most especially among students. When they get a high grade in an examination and they are congratulated for it, the most common reply is "suwerte lang." However, if they fail they would say they are "malas." This is vividly demonstrated in the market place. The concept of "suwerte" and "malas" is best seen in the practice of "buena-mano," literally, the "good hand." When one goes marketing early in the

morning, many stall owners would induce him to buy from them because he is a "buena-mano." A successful day in the market rests on the concept of "buena-mano" which is viewed as being "suwerte." If the first customer is viewed as someone who is "buenas" then the vendor is likely to sell many items and make good profit. If the "buena-mano" or initial customer is "malas," then the vendor is likely to believe that he is going to lose money. In fact they have a skill for remembering the "suwerte" and "malas" customers. The "Suki" system is based on the initial encounter between the seller and buyer. Oftentimes the seller is more than willing to offer the "Suki" a good discount, even selling the items at a loss provided the "buenas" "buena-mano" buys from him. The "buenas" is singled out as "magaan ang kamay" and the "malas" as "magbigat ang kamay."

5. *Submissiveness.* *Submissiveness* is a characteristic of an individual who is not willing to challenge those in authority. He is one who is often willing to accept commands and criticisms from others without attempting to even question them. The Filipino is usually one who is willing to accept orders from those in authority. He is one who looks up to a leader for support and is willing to allow others to make decisions for him. A good case to point is student in the classroom. Oftentimes he would simply sit in the classroom and listen to the teacher, not even bothering to raise questions and challenge some of the points advanced by the teacher. He simply takes down notes and at the end of the class period, he quietly leaves the classroom. Before an authority figure, the Filipino is very respectful and is always a good listener. If he is asked to participate in a decision-making process, he hardly speaks out his mind. If he attends meeting, hardly would he participate actively in the deliberation process. He is not going to participate unless he is directly called upon to say something. The Filipino is not likely to engage in any confrontation with those in authority regardless of whether he feels he has a right to raise issues and challenge them. After

a meeting we hear some participants claim that they did not agree with what was said and that they have many questions about the whole procedure.

Having presented some of the dominant features of Filipino behavior, let us now try to look for the bases of such behavior.

Initially, let us ask why we are personalistic in our relationships. One of the sources of our personalism is the kinship system — a dominant feature of our social structure. Our basic social and moral commitment is to the kinship. Our involvement in it is complex; the basic family system where the brother or sister is "utol" or "kaputol", literally, "halved" or "part of a whole" is linked to an extended bilateral kinship system. This is further complicated by the role played by the *compadre system* in our society. In view of such involvement, the social participation of the Filipino is not segmented but one of total involvement of the whole personality. The expectation is for him to perform many different roles demanding equal commitments. Hence any action is viewed in terms of the total personality or the whole "pagkatao." This is best captured in the expression: "Magpakatao ka."

Thus, the symbolic organization of our behavior reflects such an orientation and generally speaking, social relationship is rendered meaningful when viewed in terms of such an orientation. Our symbolic communion is based on a total understanding and commitment to the demands of the kinship system. It is interesting to note that the phrase "Pare ko" is used pervasively in social relationship because of the expectation that any good relationship must be treated in kin-like manner. Here again the interacting individuals treat each other in terms of total personalities. Thus, we find people saying that "parang magkapatid o mag-utol kami, hindi na kami ibang tao, o para na kaming mag-kamag-anak." When such people come to our house, they are expected to behave in a kin-like manner. The whole house is open to them, they are told not to behave "na parang ibang tao." If they show some hesitations, they are told not

to consider themselves as strangers or "parang iba." Clearly there is a total acceptance of the individual which is based on reciprocity. When the dominant symbolic orientation of people in a given society is in terms of kinship symbols then the shaping and ordering of social behavior will be through such symbols. This is why lineage tracing is a very common practice. For instance, if a person happens to have the same last surname as ours, we ask where he is from because there is that possibility that we are related to them and if we are co-workers, sameness in surnames either on the mother or father side is the beginning of a kin-like relationship. Hence they will no longer call each other by name but instead "Si kamag-anak." This extends to namesakes as "kaalan" or "tukayo" and to place of origin. For example, oftentimes it is possible to know a person's origin from his surname. If his surname is Escudero, we ask whether he is from San Pablo. If he says yes, we tell him that we are also from the same place and if we work in the same office we shall call each other "kabayan." In such cases, the ensuing relationship will now have the color and shade of kinship relation. The perception of one another is no longer in terms of specific task demand but more in terms of the whole personality.

In view of the total involvement of an individual in any given social relationship, we can now see why we are intrusive or "nakikialam" in the affairs of others. But of kin and kin-like symbolic communion we are compelled to be totally concerned with the whole person. Whatever is happening to a person, we must be directly concerned with him and, if our assistance is needed, it is morally expected that we extend support even if fulfilling such expectation is difficult. In other words, intrusion is viewed as a demand. In fact, when it happens that our relative or friend no longer intrudes into our affair, "walang pakikialam at pagmamalasakit," such is considered to symbolize social-psychological distance. That is to say, we no longer identify with him. When someone is no longer concerned with what we are doing, he is no longer giving value to our personality or

- "hindi pinahalagahan ang ating pagkatao." Hence, when we say that one is "walang kuwentang tao," it means that we cannot depend on him. Consequently, if our relationship is kin-like in nature then we can depend on each other any time or "puwedeng asahan sa lahat ng pagkakataon." So if we show our concern (intrusion) for another person, we are doing it because "hindi siya iba sa atin." On this basis then, social relationship is meaningful and constraining only to the extent that we are allowed to intrude into the affairs of our fellowmen.

This foregoing analysis now brings us into the area of *privacy*. Again the explanation for the lack of *privacy* in our society stems from the fact that our whole personality is directly involved in social relationship. Personal and related properties while they are technically private are viewed and interpreted in the light of the foregoing totality that they can be shared by those with whom we have kin and kin-like relationship. The fact that we are expected to show concern for others, through intrusion indicates that our opportunities to experience distance and at times be free from the intrusions of others is negligible. In our culture, it is even very difficult to speak of a private personal space. Our psychological space is defined in terms of the people with whom we have kin and kin-like relations in the community. The use of private space is not limited to the owners only. The time such an attitude will prevail is when a given family no longer feels that they completely identify with the rest of the community. Such an orientation is in fact extended to offices in the many organizations in the city. While it is true that an office signifies technical privacy, oftentimes this is violated by those with whom we have kin and kin-like relationship. Very often they come to our office and behave as if the office and everything in it also belong to them. Since so much familiarity pervades in the relationship, they do not hesitate to touch and thumb through things, to sit on their friend's swivel chair. In other words, they feel that the office is "like their own" (parang sa akin rin ito). At times, they go on to the extent of opening the drawers of the

desk and reading some of the communications found on top of the table. Such a behavior is not viewed as a direct assault on one's privacy. Because of the existing intimacy between them, whatever is found in that office, his friend is supposed to know also. In view of this, the degree of intimacy existing between friends can be observed in terms of the degree by which they use each others personal and private space. The moment they no longer identify with each other, the office relationship becomes very formal, it could very well be that a solid fence exists around the office and it is not uncommon that they will in fact avoid each other's offices unless there is utmost necessity to interact with one another.

Because of such a personalized orientation to social space, we find that in general, geographical orientation is diffused and not specific. This means that when someone leaves the house the destination is often unspecified. Thus, we observe that if one leaves the house and his parents or a member of the family should ask where he is going, the most common reply is "d'yan lang" (literally "there only") or "dito lang" (literally "here only"). Such a reply is often given because we cannot specify where we are going since it is more than possible that we are going to visit a number of our friends. Simply pointing to one or specifying one place would be misleading. Thus, to look for us, entails a search in number of places that we usually visit. Let us give a more vivid example of this diffused orientation. Suppose you are looking for a friend because of an urgent message and you found out that he is not at home. If you inquire from his mother, the most common reply is he just left or "kaalis lang." If your intention is really to see him, then you will ask where he went. Here again the reply will be "d'yan lang" or "there only." Further questioning will bring out information as to what he was wearing when he left the house. If he is not dressed, then she will try to recall places her son frequents. So, she will advise you to visit a number of likely places and chances are you will find him in one of them. This is also

extended to greeting friends on the street. When we ask him where he is going, the usual reply is "d'yan lang" or "there only." The reason for such a reply is that when we go out, it is more than possible that we are going to visit a number of friends or we may be asked to drop by an unexpected invitation by a friend encountered on the street or a friend who chanced to look out of his window. So to be specific and mention a particular friend is not usually done.

Because of such a diffused orientation to social space, orientation to time is also affected. Time orientation is equally diffused. This means that the use of time is not a calibrated one. Thus in a calibrated time orientation, time span is generally specified. For instance, when you are looking for someone and he has already left and you inquire how long ago, the reply should be "about 15 minutes ago." In a non-calibrated time orientation, the reply is "just a while ago" or "kaaalis lang" or "kani-kanina lang." Again if one is interested about the possible time his friend would return, in a calibrated time orientation the reply is "in 30 minutes." In a non-calibrated time orientation the reply is "in a short while" or "madali lang" or "hindi magtatagal iyon." In our language we find many related diffused time concepts such as "kanina lang, kanina pa, kaninang-kanina pa," etc. This diffused time-space orientation of the Filipino may be experienced even in a so-called "modern" city like Manila. Try to ask about the location of a specific street and it is very rare to find someone who will give detailed instructions as to how many blocks or after how many stoplights. The usual reply would be "a, medyo ho malayo" or "basta direchihin ninyo, malapit lang," etc.

Turning now to the question as to why the concepts of "suwerte" and "malas" play a dominant role in our behavior, we find that one dominant value-orientation of the Filipino is the belief that life is determined by certain forces over which man has no control. In view of this, his perceptions and interpretations are

conceptualized in terms of fate. He interprets his own success and those of others as simply a function of fate. Hence a successful family or individual is perceived to be successful because he is "masuwerte" or "suwerte". If he gets a windfall, he is "napaka-suwerte." However, when he fails, he is "malas" and if he fails badly, he is "napaka-malas." This pattern of behavior is vividly shown by students after an examination. Those who pass say they are "suwerte" and those who fail are "malas." It seems that our Sweepstake vendors are very much cognizant of this belief among us. When they ask us to buy a ticket they usually say "baka ho kayo suwertihin," or the combination of numbers is "suwerte." Success and failure, therefore, are not explained and interpreted in terms of forces that one is capable of manipulating and controlling but by some forces outside of the individual. When he fails to catch the bus, he says, "naiwan ako ng bus" (the bus left me); when he is caught in the rain, he says, "inabutan ako ng ulan," (the rain caught up with me); when he moves to a new residence and he encounters a number of difficulties, he says, "malas ang bahay na ito" (the house is a bad luck) or when successful, the house is "masuwerte." It is not common to hear someone say that he is successful because he carefully planned out all the necessary strategies needed to bring about success. Thus we hear people say "ganyan talaga ang buhay, parang gulong, minsan nasa itaas, minsan nasa ilalim." "Kung hindi ukol, hindi bubukol." "Iyan ay talaga ng Diyos." We can see clearly that the Filipino is not oriented to manipulate directly his own capacities and potentials and those of the social environment. Let us pursue further another source of this value orientation.

What is the source of our *submissiveness*?

The fundamental source of such behavior is traceable to the early socialization of the Filipino. The two most basic values transmitted symbolically to the child are those that will render him "mabait" and "masunurin." Added to this of course, is the value of being "magalang." As one gradually matures in

society, these values must be internalized and, in fact, acted out by him in his everyday social life. Because of this orientation, children are always perceived and interpreted in terms of such values. The child is trained to learn to accept the various ways of social life without questioning them. He should perceive and interpret adult behavior toward him as something designed for his own good or "para sa kanyang kabutihan." When one begins to ask too many questions, he is perceived to be stubborn or "matigas ang ulo" and the usual consequence is for him to be punished for his stubbornness. Perhaps this is dramatically demonstrated in the conflict between parents and adolescents. When the children begin to answer back, they are considered to be challenging the authority of the parents. Thus we find parents reacting to such situations in terms of saying "may sungay ka na." "Malaki ka na at gusto mo na akong labanan." In other words, we are trained to perceive adult authority as something not to be questioned. In addition to this, we are further trained to view other adults with a sense of awe — especially the old people. Other authority figures are used to pacify us deliberately. For instance, when a child becomes persistent or demanding and goes to the extent of crying, he is threatened by other members of the family with stories of someone coming to take him away such as a doctor, policeman, Indian merchant, ghost ("multo"), etc. We often see that when a child tries to explore his environment he is told to stop because "nand'yan ang multo." The world of the growing child is not only threatened by adult authorities at home but also by other equally powerful forces. He is trained to view such forces as capable of controlling his behavior and he is powerless to do anything about them. The expectation therefore is simply to submit to such authorities because they know what is best for him. He is viewed as someone who must always be assisted; to allow him to explore and manipulate his surroundings is to invite danger. When a

misfortune befalls him, oftentimes he is not blamed for it but others get the axe because they did not protect the child. At times, the object that features in the misfortune is animated and punished. Hence, instead of teaching the child to be more careful, a table or a chair is slapped as being "salbahe" for having hurt the child. Because of the expectation to help and protect him, the environment of the child is severely restricted and his opportunities to engage in exploratory behavior are emasculated. Consequently, he is trained to depend on others which means therefore that opportunities for self-reliance to develop are not made available to him. Thus when he attempts to assert his individuality by arguing with parents and similar adults, he is told to be quiet and listen to their words of wisdom. As a final example of exploratory restrictiveness we may look at the way we treat children's toys. Because of the inquisitiveness of children, oftentimes a toy given to them is likely to be taken apart or dismantled. If they do so, then they are punished for it. Consequently, in many homes, we find toys are locked in glass cabinets and well preserved. The child is not given the opportunity to increase his inquisitiveness and manipulative behavior.

Submissiveness of the Filipino, therefore, stems from two fundamental sources: one, the need to conform to adult authority; and two, the many restrictions imposed on his exploratory behavior. Both have ubiquitous symbols everywhere around him. Accordingly, whatever happens to him is the result of fate.

This paper has attempted to present a description and analysis of some of the dominant features of Filipino social behavior such as *personalism*, *intrusion*, *privacy*, *concept of success and failure*, and *submissiveness*. We feel that by understanding these features, we shall be able to relate them to other aspects of our social behavior which we hope will lead to a much better understanding of the Filipino.