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The Study of Society: A Perspective from Sociology and Anthropology

MARY RACELIS HOLLNSTEINER

Every nation faces the recurring task of charting its directions and assessing the course it has taken. For developing nations the problem is compounded by the stresses and strains of sporadic, uneven growth coupled with the lack of a national consensus at precisely the time it is most needed. Booming populations and rising aspirations hardly allow a leisurely approach to the problems of development. Poverty is all too real for complacency to be condoned.

Despite these difficulties, how can a nation like the Philippines best achieve its aims of improving the quality of life of its citizens in a manner that distributes the resources of the society more equitably among its people, and that fosters a sense of collective self-identity enabling it to stand proudly and dignifiedly among the nations of the world?

A basic concern for people, especially the poor, augmented with tools for understanding the society of which they are a part must characterize the educated citizenry charged with decision-making roles. Three approaches are necessary: (1) dispassionate analysis of society in terms of its structure and organization and, to the extent possible, predictive of future directions; (2) the empirical approach that assesses society as it *is*, quite apart from any value judgments as to what it *should* be; and (3) the specific techniques for determining the interplay between the national society and particular groups, including the degree of integration that evolves between these levels. It is in the expansion of this threefold approach that the disciplines of sociology and anthropology can make significant contributions.

ANALYZING SOCIETY

The rapid and sweeping changes of the twentieth century have spawned a keen interest in educated circles to grasp the reality of human behavior in more analytical terms. The new strength of the behavioral sciences of sociology and anthropology draw precisely on this thrust, for their conceptual and methodological approaches contribute to understanding society and culture. No longer can the behavior of man be simplistically portrayed as random or erratic when clearly it is well patterned. Thus, social conflict, for example, can be phrased structurally in terms of class, status, and power considerations; functionally, as integrative or disruptive; ideologically, as rooted in nationalistic religious, or ethnic zealotry; or processually, through revolutionary and evolutionary models of change. Or, the sociologist-anthropologist may focus on the people of a country, seen primarily in terms of location, as in rural or urban; stratification, exemplified by the standard class categories of low, middle, and upper cross-cutting locational considerations, or values, often distinguished as traditional or modern. The struggles of developing nations to know themselves better and the increasing refinement of the behavioral approach combine to enhance the increasingly respected position held by sociology and anthropology in relation to older disciplines.

In the Philippines sociology is a latecomer compared to anthropology. The latter first emerged strongly in the early American period in the guise of ethnographic accounts of the more exotic Filipino tribal groups. Studies of the average rural and urban Filipino — the majority population — had to wait until after World War II for their coming-of-age. The fervor of reintegration after a devastating war and the push to move forward gripped Filipino leaders and policy-makers, who in turn sought help for the crucial decisions they had to make involving the man in the street or on the carabao.

Much of the research and writing of the first decade of independence focused on the barrio, or rural village. For in this type of settlement lived over 70 percent of the total populace. If Filipino levels of living were ever to metamorphose from

their poverty base to relative affluence, then this change had to be perceptible at the grassroots level.

What makes the Filipino villager tick, asked the decision-makers. Impressions there were aplenty; but valid and reliable data remained scarce. The Ifugao, the Tinggian, and the Bagobo tucked away in their mountain heights seemed better understood by scholars than were the Tagalog, the Ilocano, and the various Visayan and other groups. The three percent dominated the literature while the 97 percent could find few sound clues to their own culture.

Community development provided the leverage for serious research efforts into Filipino behavior. Many an idealistic and well-meaning community development worker pounded for months, even years, on the minds of farmer-villagers only to give up frustrated and despairing of ever getting them to see things his way. After frequent repetition of this scenario, the one-string violin theme played by the few sociologists and anthropologist around in the 1950s began to shift from contrapuntal background music to main instrument status. From these behavioral scientists came the inexorable message that villagers were not less perceptive than community development workers and their agency leaders — just more practical. Rural-type behavior was functionally related and adaptive to the long-established social and physical environment. Changing one part of it meant changing other parts, and possibly even the whole. Moreover, one had to think in terms of risks the individual would have to take in discarding more security-producing behaviors, attitudes, and values for government-blessed ways. Obviously, the time had to come, when the community development worker would realize that only when he began to understand the village outlook and accept it as valid and rational in its own right would he stand a chance of integrating his aims meaningfully with theirs.

On the other hand, the behavioral scientist has to avoid leading the practitioner into the equilibrium trap, a social system model which does not sufficiently explain the changes, often dramatic ones, that have actually taken place. His professional

sense requires that he also investigate points of strain in the system that indicate where new ideas and behaviors are likely to emerge. For an axiom of his discipline states that every society is undergoing change, but some at much faster rates than others.

The debate has persisted and elaborated between economists, technocrats, and politicians, on the one hand, and sociologists and anthropologists, on the other. It has now expanded far beyond rural development to touch on urbanization, population and migration, youth and student groups, family and family roles, national integration, and a host of other topics. The mere fact of alternately quarreling and cooperating with one another, including arguments within the individual disciplines themselves, dramatizes the issues and identifies those problems needing more systematically collected data.

THE EMPIRICAL APPROACH

If a society is to understand itself, it must start by looking at itself as it is. The empirical approach in all sciences stresses the importance of observing facts, interpreting them, and then making generalizations. As social sciences, sociology and anthropology follow the scientific method. However, where most people are properly respectful of the physical sciences and would not attempt sweeping generalizations on limited data, the behavioral sciences verge too closely on the daily experience of people for the latter to adopt a detached stance. Hence, everyone ventures opinions, more often than not drawn from purely personal convictions, biased observations, and hearsay.

Thus, the youth activist imbued with the fervor of his beliefs assumes that like himself, the poor are smoldering with resentment at their "exploitation" and low status, and are ready to overthrow established authority together with the entire social system. Similarly, the military, especially in an authoritarian-rule set-up, may too readily assume that the prevailing peace and order situation reflects a basic satisfaction on the part of the populace with the way things are. The urban leader may devise ameliorative programs for Manila squatter colonies on the assumption that squatters are mostly migrants from barrios,

when an actual survey reveals that the great majority come from provincial towns and cities, not barrios, with the remainder Manila-born.

While having opinions and making subjective value judgments are unavoidable human traits, the educated, policy-making sectors of the populace owe it to their constituencies to rise above simplistic generalizations and temper their impressionistic outlooks with more factual, objective evidences of reality. Rarely is any situation black or white; rather it encompasses a range of greys composed of varying combinations of basic factors. Looking at the empirical reality then — at what is really there and in what proportions — brings rigor and discipline to the thought process, and presumably more enlightened decisions on the part of those making them.

More specifically, the observation-analysis-generalization sequence creates social science models closer to the reality from which they are drawn than do models developed in a different context and adapted, often badly, to the Philippine situation. While one should not discard outside ideas, because among other things they provide useful crosscultural comparisons and a necessary broad perspective, one must nonetheless be careful about applying them uncritically in inappropriate settings. In striving for locally-engendered reconstructions of reality, one comes closer to a conceptualization that makes sense and that generates meaningful implications for the future. Thus, American definitions of poverty derived largely from the 20 percent minority of the populace below the poverty line have little in common with the Filipino poor. The latter constitute close to 70 percent, and are not ethnically separated from the rest of their society as are the blacks, who make up the bulk of the American poor. Strategies appropriate to American society, therefore, may not be relevant to the Filipino poor, especially considering the difference in the financial resources available in the two countries for anti-poverty programs. Similarly, the notion of middle class seems inappropriate when applied to the Filipino middle-income earner, since the latter occupies the upper end of the income scale in a country characterized by

the poverty. The skewed character of the Filipino income distribution curve suggests that for the moment, the concept of middle class applies more meaningfully to societies whose affluence is distributed along a normal curve. Again, determining the Filipino psyche is more fruitful when one draws it out of a range of Filipinos in field or laboratory situations. Self understanding starts with empirical research into ourselves as we are.

TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING NATIONAL-LOCAL GAPS AND CONVERGENCES

In order to evaluate the state of one's society or smaller portions of it, decision-makers need mechanisms for obtaining accurate feedback from the grassroots and other sectors of the populace. The tools of sociology and anthropology play a significant role in this venture. Social survey techniques cast a large or small net over some body of data and communicate through research reports the homogeneity and variation found there. The anthropologist's participant-observation technique on the other hand, sacrifices a representative range of respondents for a deeper investigation of his subjects through intensive interviewing and long-term interaction with the sample populace. The result is usually a qualitative, insightful account of the reality he seeks to depict.

Decision-makers need to have a feel for the data-gathering process. They should understand the logic of research and be able to assess its results for translation into policy. A good grasp of statistical procedures helps greatly in a world which assaults us daily with complex mass data.

The research-versed administrator or educated person can read a report on landlord-tenant relations, and know whether it is logically and realistically formulated, whether the data presented are valid and reliable, whether the analysis is accurate and appropriate to the data, and, finally, whether the conclusions are warranted in light of the earlier steps. This holds true for other reports whether they concern drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, family planning motivation, or small-scale entrepreneurial experiments. Evaluation research, which seeks to

determine the impact of a specific program or experiment on its target population, demands further skills from the administrator of the program seeking to check his past and present operations and devise more appropriate strategies or new directions. While he need not possess the skills needed to undertake the research himself, he should be able to operationalize the aims of his program sufficiently well, that is, break them down into empirically measurable parts, to set the researcher on the right track. This entails knowing what indicators of success are explicitly or implicitly applied to his program and recasting them in empirically verifiable terms. In this manner, he can get maximum advantage out of a piece of research designed to assist him make the right decisions.

SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

If an educated citizenry is to be developed with the analytical skills, empirical outlooks, and grasp of feedback techniques earlier stipulated as necessary for the skillful management of development, then colleges and universities need to institute programs designed to communicate these aims. Through a well-constructed introductory sociology and anthropology course, students can learn how groups interact in large organizational contexts and in small informal ones. The problem of human survival and adaptation to one's environment can be investigated in order to give the student a grasp of how man has developed through the ages. These ecological relationships exemplified by tribal, peasant, and urban communities stress the linkage between technology, social organization and ideology. Diversification within groups, arising especially out of the division of labor, social stratification, and the elaboration and differentiation of special institutions like religion, law, and the family constitute other important dimensions for understanding society. From this broad view, one returns to the individual as he relates to society. Finally, the student should look at the world as a potential community and examine those relations between nations that prevent or enhance its evolution.

Other threads run throughout this subject development. A dominant one involves the methodology of communication, in this case, the importance of focusing heavily on reading and field materials from the student's own society. This will accustom him to analyzing his own culture from an empirical rather than an impressionistic or borrowed theoretical base. Yet, he also needs to analyze data from other societies from time to time, lest he become too parochial in his approach to the study of society, his own or others. Further emphasizing the empirical outlook will be carefully planned short papers analyzing field observations. His learning process will be enhanced by the use of the discussion format rather than the lecture one. Participating with his peers and the teacher in thinking out the intricacies of data on human behavior will sharpen his analytical ability and add the insights of others to his.

By equipping students with the conceptual and methodological skills to understand their own society and see it in the context of man's development, colleges and universities can produce the type of educated citizenry needed in a developing country. The sociological or anthropological view in itself is not enough, of course, to develop the whole conscientized person. Much more is required. But the right ideological direction will be significantly enhanced by the type of expertise and outlook that sociology and anthropology provide.