

NOT AN EASY WAY UP: A LIFE HISTORY OF A MIDDLE CLASS FILIPINO FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

This case study focuses on an emerging middle class Filipino family, its life history, its struggle to break out of the economic marginalities and impoverishment of lower class life, and its attempts to find a niche within the upper class. In my analysis, I situate the middle class along the notions of contradictory class locations and economic marginalities in order to understand its private class struggle for self-improvement. Specifically, the study examines how this family negotiates the two contradictory class positions it occupies, on the one hand, as proletariat, and on the other, as a petty capitalist, and how these positions have accorded it a more comfortable and dignified life at present than when this family was newly formed. Results of the case study show that the economic capital this family accumulated through many years of hard work, perseverance, determination, and frugality has been transformed into cultural capital that the children now enjoy.

However, the study also found out that with cultural restrictions legitimizing one's membership in the privileged class of the rich, this family has no prospect of moving beyond their present social position. Additionally, the study also revealed that the ability of the latter generation to reproduce the middle class status they inherit from their parents is largely determined by the personal qualities they had emulated. Therefore, this paper argues that human agency remains the determining factor for social mobility amidst cultural and structural restrictions.

Introduction

After spending several years studying the lives of people in a migrant community in Manila, Philippines, Pinches (1992a) noted that in order to survive the majority of the poor have only their labor as capital. The few rich, on the other hand, have the means of production and do not need to exert physical labor to produce wealth. Furthermore, the rich tend to display conspicuous consumption, many of them living comfortably in gated communities located in suburban areas replete with all the amenities that signify both their affluence and influence (Connell, 1999: 421-422). Nevertheless, the rich are also distinguished from each other either as old or new rich, according to the size of their economic resources and the cultural sophistication they exhibit (Panopio, Cordero-McDonald, & Raymundo, 1994: 382; Robison & Goodman, 1996: 5; Pinches, 1999b: 296). Among the poor, variations in economic status and life chances are also discernible depending on how they make the most out of their involvement in the capitalist labor market and other livelihood opportunities.

The growth of capitalism and the greater chances for social mobility through individual achievement have produced a class of people who are neither rich nor poor. The rise of this intermediate class in the context of present economic conditions and changes is often overlooked because of the tendency of dualist analysis of class structure to concentrate on distribution of wealth. This social reality has thus made a dualist analysis of class inadequate in capturing the dynamics of this emergent class. This present study argues that the struggle of the intermediate class also needs to be explored.

I will explore this notion by focusing on the economic and cultural struggle of a Filipino family towards becoming part of the middle class, or perhaps eventually of the new rich. But more than simply telling this family's life history, I will instead situate its experiences along the existing discourses about class and cultural identity within the contexts of contradictory class locations and economic marginalities. Needless to mention, this

case study of the couple's life history will provide the empirical basis for my discussion. Proceeding basically from Weber's concept of subjectivity of meanings of actions, my analysis aims to underscore that human agency still plays an important role in social mobility despite cultural and structural restrictions.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Beyond class dichotomy

While the dichotomous representation of class and labor relations in the Marxist tradition—a legacy of the Industrial Revolution—was responsive to the realities of that period, it has ceased to have any significance for the present. According to Ossowski (1963: 151), the concept of class dichotomy is so ideal it has no longer a place in the real capitalist world of the present. The alternatives available for labor migration (Pinches, 2001) and the accumulation of capital for new entrepreneurs (Pinches, 1999a) brought about by the democratization of travel, formal education, intermarriages, and business opportunities have already made possible intermediate shift in class structure, identity, and relations (Pinches, 1999b: 12-13). Furthermore, the spread of capitalism and the growth of cities close to the countryside offer new economic fields to people endowed with skills, personal qualities, and capital. These conditions allow individuals to move from one occupational category to the next motivated by whatever economic gains they calculate at each stage relative to their needs.

Exemplifying this development are an exceptional number of Filipinos at present who have found ways to move from agriculture to industrial employment in urban centers and overseas or from being wage laborers to petty employers. This shift could be attributed largely to the entrepreneurial investment they have built from many years of savings and hard work (Pinches, 1992a; 1999a). From the perspective of class relations, it is obvious that this emerging breed of middle class or new rich Filipinos, with their multifaceted economic

engagement, could not just be lumped under certain category based on the dualist representation of class. They belong to the intermediate class (Ossowski, 1963: 151), and their position and identity in the class structure are determined by their ability to sustain or improve whatever resources they currently accumulate, enjoy, and pass on to the succeeding generation.

In the wake of this development, it becomes imperative to view social class not only as a system of structural categorization of people fixed at certain period and dimension, but also as a spatial-temporal process involving individuals or groups struggling for self-improvement as revealed in their life histories (e.g. Eder, 2000). This view is in consonance with Lipuman and Meltzoff's (1989: 329) suggestion that anthropology must treat class "as living, emergent, and constantly transforming categories" exemplified by a more mobile middle class as opposed "to rock-stable, predetermined categories" suggested by the proletariat-capitalist distinction of social class.

The struggle of the intermediate class

I find the growing phenomenon of middle class or new rich¹ in the Philippines interesting to explore because it illustrates the dynamic nature of social class and the way it is influenced by individual initiatives and differing levels of motivation. This view departs from the usual Marxist notion that the restructuring of class position could be achieved through collective actions. Varied interpretations about class struggle in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have highlighted the pervasive military metaphors they contain showing the use of force as an option in winning over capitalist dominance. However, Metcalfe (1991: 79) believes that the military metaphors associated with class struggle prevent a broader understanding of class relations and a better appreciation of social mobility experienced by the middle class.

This paper argues that a Weberian individualistic approach to class struggle provides a better way of

understanding the choices, decisions, and actions that individuals take in response to the opportunities around them. According to Max Weber, it is the individual who acts, not the state or the group, while the collectivities of actions we see are actually a multitude of individual actions (Duke, 1983: 258). Too much emphasis on collectivities as determinant of individual actions undermines the potential of private actions for initiating a social transformation. These individual actions are often ignored or taken for granted because they purportedly do not represent the social reality. But social reality is a matter of individual perception and therefore has subjective meanings that eventually draw out different responses. It may be said that collective actions are actually the imposition of a prevailing discourse aimed at suppressing the potentials of private or individual actions.

Although I do not dispute the potent power of the collectivities of actions such as protest movements or even arm struggle to resist economic and political repression, they often end in indiscriminate destruction and violence and rarely lead to the victory of the working classes-turned-proletarian soldiers. I believe there is a need to reconsider what Metcalfe (1991: 90) calls private class struggle by individuals whose subjective experience of economic degradation, humiliation, and exploitation has given them the impetus to fight against all odds in order to regain their dignity and identity as human beings. There is that need to recognize and appreciate from a Weberian perspective (Duke, 1983: 88) individual abilities in interpreting, adapting, and taking advantage of new economic opportunities in this age of globalization (*e.g.* Eder, 2000) when collective struggle is often met with political and structural obstacles.

Hence, the analysis of actual class relationships at a micro-level has to consider different historical circumstances surrounding the experiences of people who are struggling for economic betterment. In the Philippines, Pinches (1999a) has shown how the new middle class or the new rich are produced

and reproduced despite the many political and cultural impediments they have to overcome, and how some come out successful. This suggests that responses to shared suffering or repression are not always unified or predictable but relative to the moral choices made by individuals (Metcalf, 1988: 30). Therefore, studies of class relations would do well to focus not only on the dynamics of class or collective struggle, but also on the ability of the middle class to respond positively to the economic marginalities they experience rather than be simply engulfed by them. Unfortunately, according to Metcalfe (1990: 57), the struggle of the middle class is oftentimes overlooked because of the tendency of social analysts to take the politics of the industrial workers (*e.g.* coalminers) as a model of the “proper” class struggle. Moreover, the success stories of prominent members of the middle class or new rich, who make big names in the field of business or politics, have a way of captivating public attention. Meanwhile, because they create little impact on the community, success stories of the average middle class tend to be overlooked.

Despite the rising number of success stories, however, studies on the middle class have also shown that individuals in this group are not always successful in appropriating the dominant cultural attributes of the elite class. In other words, not all of these life stories are successful because of certain social and structural impediments beyond the individuals’ personal control. Part of the reason lies mainly on the peculiar location of the middle class in the existing class hierarchy. Despite the economic successes of the middle class, its cultural roots remain entrenched in the working class. A distinct mark of the cultural identity of the middle class is its part membership in the working class, albeit demarcated by whatever visible economic improvements they have realized. These economic improvements are themselves indexical of the private struggles that successful members of this class have pursued.

Negotiating contradictory class locations

I view the intermediate position of the middle class between the lower and the upper social classes as a successful move away from deprivation that characterizes much of lower class experience, as well as a continuing struggle to breach the economic and cultural barrier set by the more privileged class. The structural movement that the middle class negotiates within the middle range of the economic continuum exemplifies the contradictory class location of the middle class. Robison and Goodman (1996: 9) believe that there are significant internal divisions within the middle class. These internal divisions highlight the question whether members of the middle class possess a coherent identity considering their divergent interests and agendas particularly when they are categorized as old and new middle class.

On the other hand, studies by Robison and Goodman (1996) and Pinches (1999b) consider the new middle class as the new rich despite the economic and cultural ambiguities associated with this position. These studies argue that, as the new rich, members of the middle class are distinguished from the lower and upper social classes by their way of life. According to these studies, the work relations, income, occupational prestige, educational status, or place of residence of members of this group are considered as economically and culturally distinct from those below and above them. Therefore, their position could only be defined and appreciated in relation to the economic and cultural characteristics of the poor and the rich. This situation suggests that the cultural construction of the middle class identity is an unintended byproduct of the dualist representation of social class. Meanwhile, Lallana (1987: 329) explains that unbounded relationship of the middle class to the mode of actual production determined by occupational categories is indicative of the existence of contradictory class locations. He identifies these contradictions within a mode of production (*e.g.*, managers but not decision-

makers) and between modes of production (e.g., independent peasants but still wage laborers).

Contradictory class locations also explain the economic marginalities experienced by certain individuals and reflect their simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment at different modes or levels of the production process. Therefore, individuals situated in contradictory class locations are at once faced with the challenge of transforming available resources in order to benefit economically from intermediate roles and at the same time threatened with dislodgment by the capitalists who fear the possible competition from the emerging new rich (Robison & Goodman, 1996; Pinches, 1999b).

In the foregoing discussion, I find Bourdieu's notion of "field of struggle" relevant in explaining how certain individuals, despite being caught in contradictory class locations, are able to improve their life chances. In fact, Bourdieu's mode of theorizing offers a more dynamic understanding of class relations and allows an optimistic treatment of the chances for social mobility of marginalized people. Bourdieu refers to capital, either economic or cultural (Garnham, 1986: 426) as endowments. Even if capital maybe historically endowed, Bourdieu argues that certain chosen subfields may offer individuals several options or strategies of investments, which could yield the highest profit and subsequently result in investment in other fields. Education, for example, has always been considered a cultural capital with its proven worth as a passport for entry in the labor market and access to economic capital. Investing hard-earned money in education then becomes for the marginalized one of the best means for gaining access into the labor market and subsequently in the acquisition of economic capital (Garnham, 1986: 427).

This belief lies at the heart of many poor Filipino parents' struggle to give their children a bright future. For these parents, investing in the education of their children provides one of the best assurances for social mobility. While land inheritance enables the old rich to maintain their status, education provides

the new rich opportunities for social mobility. For many of this new rich, it is precisely their experience of economic marginality that principally motivates them to explore all means in search for a better life. Often, this means navigating contradictory modes of production activities and relationships.

Building upon economic marginalities

Marginality is a condition commonly viewed as negative for its implications of exclusion and peripheralization. As a process, marginalization is theoretically rooted in the essentialist claim of biological or cultural superiority by the privileged or elite class. In the context of class relations, the concept promotes the representation of workers as incapable of self-development. In its bleakest sense, it undermines the capability of individuals to escape from and rise above economic degradation and destitution. As studies show, however, the experience of marginalization can serve as the strongest impetus for even the poorest of the poor to work at improving their lives economically and overcoming the challenges imposed by their poverty.

For example, studies by Pinches (1992a: 126) have shown that highly motivated individuals who migrated to the city to escape economic denigration at home have experienced a sense of having prospered in their new life compared to their former lives in the countryside. This is particularly true among those who have risen to middle class status. Although marginalized from the capitalist mode of production, these successful migrants consider their present life better off relative to their access to wider economic options in the place of migration or urban centers compared to what was available to them in their hometown. An interesting offshoot of these migrations is enhanced labor recruitment. Studies reveal that early migrants who are now economically well established and who either hold managerial positions or have become employers in their own right prefer to hire workers from members of their family or among neighbors in the old hometown, consequently

enhancing labor recruitment from their place of origin (Pinches, 1992a: 128). Their ability to help find employment for poorer relations or former neighbors in the countryside has raised their status in their old community and earned them the respect of their former neighbors. Needless to mention, this has been for many of these people a source of much psychological gratification.

In one migrant community in Manila, Pinches (1992a) has observed that successful migrants are able to spend more money, provide their children education, and enjoy the pleasure of city life. They are more able to cope with various forms of marginalization because of their past experiences in their respective places of origin. Unsuccessful migrants, however, who decide to go back to their communities face the stigma of failure and censure by both successful migrants as well as by neighbors in their hometown. Meanwhile, the success stories of some migrants continue to inspire others to follow the same path toward self-improvement, their direction leading them away from agricultural work and toward industrial employment.

Subjective meanings of social class

The life chances of individuals vary not only among different social classes, but within the class itself particularly among the members of the middle class—considered as the most mobile and exemplifying the most significant internal divisions. For example, the study conducted by Pelaez (1986: 128) on one community in Cebu City, Philippines revealed three categories of middle class based on the self-evaluation of her informants. These categories include the lower-middle class, middle-middle class, and upper-middle class. Most of the members of the upper-middle class describe themselves as *labaw sa kasarangan*² (above average), the middle-middle class as *kasarangan* (average), and the lower-middle class as *igo-igo lang gyud intawon* (just enough). Results of this study showed that many considered themselves to belong to the middle-middle class while only very few classified themselves

in the upper-middle class. This self-evaluation mirrors differential modes and rate of rising up.

The local terminologies used by the informants of Pelaez (1986: 129) in describing their economic well being in relation to the other members of the middle class demonstrate that within this class an indigenous mode of social differentiation operates. The varying self-identity of members of the middle class further suggests divergent interests and agenda as well as alliances aimed at protecting their current status (Robison & Goodman, 1996: 8-9). Meanwhile, those who qualify as members of the new rich (*e.g.*, Robison & Goodman, 1996; Connell, 1999; Pinches, 1999a, 1999b) originate mostly from the upper-middle class although exceptional cases do come from either the lower-middle class or the middle-middle class.

It is widely accepted that the aspirations for self-improvement are psychologically motivated. This view has often been used to explain the endeavors of members of the middle class to improve their lot as well as to justify the sense of complacency that members of the lower class are said to feel towards their condition. A widespread perception is that the poor tend to be fatalistic towards life while the middle class are individualistic, competitive, frugal, and more sacrificing, generally exhibiting strong deferred gratification syndrome (Panopio, Cordero-MacDonald & Raymundo, 1994: 383-384; *cf.* Pinches, 1999a, 1999b). On the other hand, the upper class are said to be disdainful of the middle class's lifestyle—their choice of fashion, architectural design of house, model of service vehicle, schools where children attend—which they view as indicators of the latter's lack of culture or good taste.

However, these comments redound to stereotyping, a practice that is not only simplistic but also obviously overlooks the background, nature, and characteristics of the new middle class. Class categorization based on personalities only tends to create prejudices while undermining the individual's ability to achieve social mobility. Class personalities are only results rather than causes of class locations. It is possible that the

education will eventually endow the middle class some of the cultural sophistication of the upper class.

The tendency to use an individual's psychological make up to explain the difference between the lower class and the middle class is inadequate if not outright flawed. Rather, the difference lies in the respective class's interpretation of the antecedent and concomitant events surrounding their lives. Anthropologist Leslie A. White (1949: 176) believes that the behavioral manifestations so frequently presumed to be psychological are actually the result of a socio-cultural process overtly expressed in resultant behavior. Consequently, the ability of the poor and the middle class to overcome the challenges they face depends upon their response to the situation and to their appropriate assessment of the needs and resources available to them. Interestingly, even when two groups are subjected to the same external circumstances, their responses are rarely similar. Differing response even to the same stimulation may explain the upward or downward mobility of certain individuals within the class origins.

Cultural navigation by new middle class

As pointed out elsewhere in this paper, members of the emerging middle class find themselves pressed between the binary representations of class identity because of their intermediate location within the hierarchy of class. On the one hand, they have successfully overcome the economic marginalities and degradation of their former lower class position. On the other hand, they now find themselves faced with the challenge of projecting and maintaining their identity as new members of the middle class. Their agenda is to strive to be distinct from the lower class where they were once members and at the same time to be identified with the upper class, which has an established set of normative expectations for anyone who desires to become part of its enclave (*cf.* White, 1949: 159). This means that displaying newly accumulated wealth alone does not guarantee the middle class

acceptance into the world of the upper class. Their newly acquired status, however, is still to be legitimated by cultural sophistication and its attendant refinement that must still be learned (Jenkins, 1992: 142), if not by themselves at least by their children through formal education (Pinches, 1999b: 36).

Theoretically, social boundaries are established to legitimize class distinctions and are reflected in terms of class relation, *i.e.* how the members of the middle class view and relate with the other social classes and vice versa. This may also be discerned in the way the new members of the middle class conduct themselves along class boundaries, usually according to what matters to them most or to the fears confronting them. In effect, the contradictory class locations and the economic marginalities they experience expose them to two forms of fear that underlie their current struggle. According to their response to these fears, we see one group whose earlier worries involved the success or failure of their climb up the social ladder and whose present concern is about falling back to the lower class while anticipating their rejection by the upper class. In the other group belong those who put a premium on achieving their aspirations for themselves and for their children independent of the views or perceptions of the upper class. Though they worry about falling down, acceptance by the upper class is the last of their concerns.

CASE STUDY

Building a family from limited resources

The couple, I will name Jose and Maria in this study, are presently in their late sixties and reside in one of the newly created cities in Negros Oriental. Their life history elucidates the struggle of people from poor beginnings. However, their significant rise was not an overnight success story, but a compilation of events, right and timely decision-making, and efficient management of modest resources accumulated from many years of hard work. When Maria and Jose married, some of Maria's relatives doubted Jose's ability to raise a decent

family because he was only a migrant factory laborer with no stable economic capital. In time, however, Jose and Maria managed to dispel everyone's doubts about their ability to overcome the difficulties of their early life.

The prominent status that Jose and Maria now enjoy in their neighborhood, as well as among their relatives, is the outcome of their efforts to produce the most out of the limited resources they had when they began their life together as a married couple. Perseverance and strong motivation to escape the relative poverty of their respective families, rather than through inheritance or education, had enabled them to generate their capital. Coming from large families, neither Jose nor Maria had any opportunity to get a college education due to financial constraints. Having finished only second year high school, Jose worked as a laborer in a plywood factory through the help of a relative who held supervisory position in the company. Maria, on the other hand, completed only the secondary level and contributed additional income to the family by working as a seamstress, a skill she learned from a six-month sewing course in a vocational school.

Skillful management of their meager resources and frugal lifestyle enabled the couple to save enough money. In less than ten years they were able to buy farmlands and raised some domestic animals, such as swine, cows, and carabaos. The first farmland they bought was owned by Maria's parents, who were in turn forced to sell some parcels to support the college expenses of Maria's younger siblings. Jose continued his work in the factory while also starting rice farming through a tenant. These were the sources of their income until he decided in 1973 to concentrate on developing his rice farm. By the time the plywood factory finally closed in the late 70s, when the forest areas in Negros Oriental were almost denuded, he was already a full-time farmer.

To escape the imminent implementation of the land reform program, he decided to get back the rice lands, which had been originally leased to tenants, and started sugarcane farming

using a small parcel of their land that had been mainly planted to rice. Jose's decision was influenced partly by the exemption of sugarcane farms from the land reform program and mainly by the establishment of a sugar mill in the area, which created a boom in the sugar industry at the time. It should be noted that the rise of some middle class families in this area has been largely attributed to the growth of the sugar industry. Ironically, this was also responsible for the bankruptcy of some who were not able to manage their resources during the crisis in the industry.

Engagement in two modes of production

Although Jose personally cultivates his farm, he also hires workers and once had some tenants in the more remote parts of the farm. Similarly, Maria also employs other seamstresses when work is plentiful, particularly during *fiesta* (feasting in honor of a patron saint) celebrations and school programs like graduation rites. At present, Jose and Maria are engaged in financing business, providing capital to small time rice and sugar farmers, as well as extending loans to those in need of cash for household or other emergency needs.³ Maria particularly deals with small rice farmers while Jose transacts with small sugarcane planters.

Interests from every transaction comprise the profits that Jose and Maria earn from their financing business. Rice farmers repay their loans in the form of *palay* (unhusked rice) after harvest (3 to 4 months), whereas the sugarcane farmers pay in cash after the milling season (10 months). Maria has the *palay* milled and packed in 50 kg bags to sell in cash or on credit to teachers and other salaried professionals in the neighborhood. She also retails the rice, usually on credit, to poorer neighbors, who pay on installment basis.

The economic transition experienced by Jose and Maria illustrates how they maintain an unbounded relationship to the means of production, for example, as wage laborers in one context and employers or landlords and financiers in another.

As a factory laborer, Jose knew he was disempowered in the sense that he was not in the position to determine the value of his labor or decide when to work or take a break. But as a farmer, an occupation he performed alongside his factory job, he felt empowered by being able to make decisions involving what, when, and how he was to cultivate his farm.

While managing tenants as well as hired workers in his farm gives Jose a sense of empowerment, the rise or fall of prices of rice and sugar in the capitalist market over which he has no control also leaves him feeling disempowered at the same time. In fact, farmers who engaged in mono-production of sugarcane and went bankrupt when the industry collapsed in the mid-80s because of the unstable price of sugar in the world market provide a human face to the severity of the disempowerment caused by capitalism.

Aware of the vulnerability of the sugarcane economy to external forces, Maria worked hard at her own tailoring business, demonstrating her exemplary ability not just in supplementing Jose's income, but in maintaining the stability of their financial resources particularly during the sugar industry crisis. This situation exemplifies Eder's (2000: 13) view that gender equality in household decision making and economic activities underlies much of the success that households achieve in hurdling economic limitations and rising above their current status. In this sense, not only Jose but also Maria deserves the credit for this family's improved life and rise to the middle class status.

Self-identity and maintenance as middle class

As this case study illustrates, sheer hard work has enabled this couple to build their family and push it beyond economic marginality. However, their story does not end here. Having moved up the social ladder, they are now faced with the challenge of presenting and maintaining their identity as new members of the middle class. Nevertheless, despite their significantly improved lifestyle, they are content to consider

themselves as belonging to the “middle-middle class”. This self-identity prompts them to be more careful in managing their financial resources, fearful that any miscalculation on their part could cause them to lose what they have accumulated through years of hard work.

Old age has also mellowed their desire to achieve more and struggle to go beyond their present social level. Instead, they continue to aspire for their children what they have not themselves achieved in their own lifetime. In their early years, they doubted their ability to send their children to school to earn college degrees. Their fears that their children would end up working as farmers, factory workers, farm workers or domestic helpers in Manila or somewhere provided the impetus for their hard work and self-sacrifice.⁴

At the height of their sugarcane-farming venture, Jose and Maria feared what all other sugarcane farmers feared—the uncertainty of this undertaking particularly when the industry was in crisis. They knew many of the farmers who lost most of their properties to the bank to which they owed money. They saw many of their contemporaries sell all they had in order to support their children’s education. Jose and Maria were not spared the consequences of the sugar crisis, but the produce from their rice farm mitigated the effects of this crisis. Rice farming gave them something to fall back on when sugarcane production was not good. They also managed to overcome financial problems over their children’s college expenses by selling cows and swine and through the earnings of Maria as seamstress.

It is evident from their life story that the ability of the couple to manage their limited resources enabled them to weather many economic storms that otherwise swept away many of their contemporaries. Moreover, the support and understanding of their children also allowed them to cope with the crisis with greater chances of success. For their part, the couple’s children rewarded their parents’ sacrifices by successfully finishing their studies. The oldest of the children

worked as student assistant while in college. Today, all of Jose and Maria's six children have college degrees and work as professionals.

At last, Jose and Maria now find themselves no longer burdened by financial obligations. Nevertheless, they remain economically productive and even more active at present than they ever were in the past. Their present earnings have enabled them to renovate their old house and to buy Jose a second-hand motorcycle, which replaced his now old and rusty bicycle, for many years his only means of transport to the farm or the market. Interestingly, despite the prodding of his children, Jose remains unconvinced of the need to buy a four-wheel service vehicle, which he considers simply as a luxury. If he had his way, he preferred to invest on a cargo truck to start a new business in hauling sugarcane. Unfortunately, his family remains skeptical of this venture and has discouraged him from this plan. To this day, the couple's business endeavors continue to prosper, their earnings wisely invested in farmlands recently acquired from members of their own family who were no longer interested in the property. Possessing neither retirement pension nor health insurance, both Jose and Maria now earmark their savings for their old age.

Social attachment to roots

Despite the significant shift of their economic condition, Jose and Maria remain attached to their roots in the community and cognizant of their humble beginnings. Although displaying some material evidence of prosperity, they never flaunt their wealth. Jose continues to work at the farm, preferring to be known as a farmer rather than a farm manager, and believing that farm work would help him stay physically healthy. Despite his affluence in the neighborhood, he remains socially in touch with the poor farm workers and maintains friendly relations with them.

Meanwhile, the *fiesta* as a ritual is one of several other social venues in which to examine how Jose and Maria maintain

class relationships with the poor farm workers as well as with the professionals particularly teachers who are guests of their children. During *fiesta*, Jose and Maria are also asked by the *barangay* (village) chapel leaders to host lunch at their house for the priest who officiates the mass. The opportunity to entertain important people or public figures symbolically endows recognition to the family's social standing in the community. In the past, the families of the *barangay* captain and teachers used to be given this privilege.

During *fiesta*, the house of Jose and Maria gathers a mix of farm workers and professionals but it is interesting to note that the spatial arrangement in this household is more or less determined by the social distinction of the guests. For instance, the living room is the designated space for the professionals. Meanwhile, a special place near the kitchen, which can be entered by the back door, has been designated for entertaining Jose's former farm workers. Here, the farm workers feel they can behave more freely and more comfortably, preferring the company of their own kind to mixing with people of a different social class, such as the professionals, who occupy the living room during this occasion. Jose effectively bridges this social gap by moving between the two groups regularly in the course of the celebration. In this way, he is able to make a link with a socially higher class, in this case of professionals, in which he has just become a member while maintaining his connections with his roots represented by the farm workers.

But more significantly, *fiesta* permits people to gain entry into one's private domain, allowing the public a rare view of the evidence of material success of its owners. In the case of Jose and Maria, this is an occasion for showing off the improvements in their newly renovated house, itself an indexical sign of their economic affluence and their social standing in the community. As a status symbol, a house and what is inside it are significant indicators of the current economic status of its owner upon which the guests usually base their judgments.

Meanwhile, Pinches (1992b) had also observed in his study how unity and division within a *fiesta* celebration demonstrate class identity and relation. Although all people in the community join hands to celebrate *fiesta* as a tradition, encoded in the kind of food they prepare, the guests they entertain, the activities either in the church or community programs in which they are involved, including their clothes and many other visible indicators, are the social distinctions that separate one class from another.

Intergenerational mobility and class reproduction

It is generally viewed that although education is considered a basic factor in occupational mobility, it is its quality that counts, in most cases interpreted as the academic institution from where such education has been acquired. According to Panopio, Cordero-MacDonald, and Raymundo (1994: 386), the quality of one's education depends to a considerable degree on the parents' socioeconomic status. This observation is, however, belied by the experience of Jose and Maria who, despite economic odds, managed to send their children to a private university in Dumaguete City known as a school for the middle and upper social classes. Three of their children are teachers, two are engineers, and one is a commerce graduate. Five of the children have their own respective families now and live separately, while the youngest is still single but also gainfully employed as a processing plant engineer somewhere in Luzon.

Jose and Maria's life history demonstrates intergenerational or social mobility in terms of educational attainment and occupation. Their children are now engaged in salaried professions or business and are moving away from agriculture upon which Jose and Maria depended heavily during the early years of their life. This occupational shift supports the findings of Pelaez (1986: 282) that most of the grandfathers of the middle class were self-employed farmers and most of the fathers are self-employed traders.

In their own time, Jose and Maria had to start from scratch but eventually managed to move up, sparing their children the hardships that they themselves experienced. For their part, their children are, so to speak, more endowed, having their start in life already at the middle rung of the economic ladder and did not have to experience the same sacrifices their parents underwent. Unlike their parents who had only labor as capital and frugality as virtue when they began life together as couple, their children had quality education as capital. This enables them entry into more rewarding and better paying jobs in a highly competitive labor market which in turn allow them to enjoy the fruits of their labor with greater dignity.

Currently, Jose and Maria have only economic capital to legitimize their status as middle class whereas their children are endowed with both economic and cultural capitals. But for Jose and Maria, seeing all their children enjoy a family life far different from their own is a major achievement. Theoretically speaking then, the children's economic chances are better than their parents, but only time will tell whether Jose and Maria have indeed reproduced families who will at least maintain their middle class status if not exceed their present station. The success or failure of Jose and Maria's own children will further test the notion of the importance of personal abilities in overcoming economic marginalities in life. These qualities of hard work, perseverance, determination, and frugality are significant marks of Jose and Maria's private struggle to be members of the middle class. Whether or not all the six children could sustain and even surpass the class status handed down to them by their parents remains an open question. In the end, this will largely depend on the kind of struggle each child will also pursue.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATION

I have theoretically and empirically illustrated in this paper that the rise of a family to a middle class status and the manner of its maintenance and reproduction are influenced by

its ability to cope with contradictory class locations and economic marginalities. Members of the middle class have more fluid interests relative to available resources and opportunities but exhibit a stable desire for self-improvement. The intermediate position between the lower and the upper social classes exposes the members of the middle class to conflicting interests and alliances. This makes collective struggle by the middle class for social mobility unimaginable because its members are divided between those who align with either of the two opposite social classes. But such could be remedied by examining the life history and the private struggle that each of its members pursued. The case study presented in this paper has shown the uniqueness of the couple's struggles as they simultaneously tread along the proletarian and petty capitalist modes of life, economically and culturally. As Jose and Maria's experience exemplified, such struggle is not easy to undertake without the joint effort of husband and wife.

There is a need to conduct more ethnographic studies on life histories of new middle class families with different sources of capital. These include overseas Filipino workers, those married to foreigners, salaried professionals, local politicians, petty capitalists, among others. A compilation of life histories of middle class families would further increase our understanding of the dynamic, unique, and diverse patterns of their production and reproduction. One area in urgent need of examination is the intergenerational social mobility of middle class families, particularly one focusing on private class struggles. This will provide more empirical basis for the exploration of the role of private class struggle behind the successful move to the middle class of those who came from very poor beginnings. Although isolated private class struggle may have no significant influence on social class restructuring and distinction, the strategies individuals employ can provide inspirations and lessons to others still struggling to overcome economic marginalities. As Jose and Maria have illustrated in

this case study, the way to get there is never easy, but we know that it is possible.

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Notes

¹ For its apparent descriptive simplicity as well as its common use as an expression, “new rich” is the term preferred by Pinches (1999b) in contrast to the old middle class to describe this emerging social phenomenon in Asia. However, I have opted to retain the term middle class in this paper to indicate its intermediate location between lower and upper class. This is supported by a study in Negros Oriental (Abregana, 1998: 19) which shows that when individuals are asked to classify the economic status of their families, some tend to locate themselves in the borderline (21%), between poor (63%), and rich (16%). This distribution is also reflective of the situation in the Philippines.

² The terms used here are in Cebuano - one of the several regional languages in the Philippines and used prominently in Central Visayas and Mindanao.

³ This is locally known as *alili* and it is undeniably a capitalist mode of transaction. The interest rate ranges from 10% to 12% per month based on cropping period. To some extent, it may be adjusted according to the status or ability to pay of the transacting parties, but generally the practice puts many farmers in perennial indebtedness to the creditor, especially when production is poor. Meanwhile, the risk of losing is always high on the part of the creditor because the informal

arrangement of lending requires no collateral other than social familiarities. Nonetheless, failure to repay means severing of ties for future engagement.

⁴ The community has been known as recruitment area for factory workers and domestic helpers called *sacadas*, who are brought to Manila.

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