

Toward a realistic aspiration: A Foucauldian discourse analysis of Reycel Hyacenth Bendaña’s valedictory texts

Faye B. Zipagan^{1*}

Structured abstract

Background: In a country that celebrates stories for their exceptional nature, how academic success is construed in the context of poverty is not only telling of broader societal conditions but also critical in constructing outcomes.

Purpose: Examine the discourses surrounding the academic success among poor Filipino youth.

Research design: Foucauldian discourse analysis

Data source: Ateneo de Manila University Class 2019 valedictorian Reycel Hyacenth Bendaña’s (a) qualifying essay ‘Prayer for Generosity’ and (b) actual speech ‘Questioning the Hill’

Data analysis: Based on Willig’s (2008) version of Foucauldian discourse analysis, the different discursive constructions of the academic success among poor Filipino youth were identified. The discourses to which these belong were then analyzed in terms of the purpose that they serve (action orientation), where and how they situate the actors (positioning), the possibilities for action that they render (practice) as well as their likely implications on psychological experience (subjectivity), power, and social change.

Findings: Academic success among poor Filipino youth was framed as (a) unrealistic aspiration under the socioeconomic discourse, (b) individual compensation under the psychological discourse, (c) generosity’s manifestation under the philanthropic discourse, and (d) societal exception under the justice discourse. Among these, the justice discourse was shown to put the poor Filipino youth in the most empowered position, advancing social change through the assertion of equal educational opportunities for all and transforming the construction of academic success among poor Filipino youth into a societal norm.

Recommendation: Discourses that spark hope, distribute power, and compel social change need to be advanced and supported by individuals and institutions alike. Because in the end, to adopt a discourse is to claim its reality, even imperfectly and no matter how gradually.

Keywords

academic success, discourse, poor Filipino youth, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Ateneo valedictorian

¹Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6797-2136>

*Corresponding author: faye.zipagan@obf.ateneo.edu

Introduction

Around graduation time in May 2019, the country once again witnessed a spectacle with a symbol of poverty rising to the spotlight of academic success. Several news articles featured Reycel Hyacenth ‘Hya’ Bendaña, the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU) Class 2019 valedictorian. Far from the common Atenean with an affluent profile, Hya came from an impoverished background. This stark contrast proved highly salient that most of the headlines tagged her as daughter of a jeepney driver alongside being ADMU’s top graduate.

In the wider Philippine scene, about 9% of the estimated 39.2 million Filipinos aged 6 to 24 years old are not able to attend school and complete their studies. This percentage seems small at first. Yet, when translated into numbers, this represents as many as 3.6 million Fil-

ipino children and youth who are out-of-school. Among the most common reasons behind this incidence is the lack of financial resources, consistent with the fact that half of these children and youth belong to families whose income falls at the bottom 30%, based on their per capita income (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018). Furthermore, a survey by an insurance firm reported that only 23% of Filipinos finish college. Again, part of the major contributors to this dismal rate is poverty which hinders parents from sending their children to higher education (Philippine News Agency, 2017).

With the above representation, it is not difficult to see how Hya’s academic feat stood out as she reached and even exceeded a commonly unattained level of education among poor Filipino youth. Apart from this, what makes Hya’s particular success story even more note-

worthy is the emergence of wider discourses through which academic attainment was tackled in relation to poverty. Through her essay for valedictorian selection (Bendaña, 2019a) and her actual valedictory speech (Bendaña, 2019b), Hya underscored the broader societal context of her experience in light of many more disadvantaged Filipino youth.

The different constructions and discourses about academic success among poor Filipino youth are what the present study sought to examine. The use of a discursive approach advances the notion that how an object is seen or constructed constitutes reality itself (Willig, 2008). Such constructions generate ways of being that may be taken as truths and can therefore exert power over people's lives (Foucault, 1980). Hence, how discourses construct academic success among poor Filipino youth is critical in shaping their social and psychological realities, as well as in perpetuating existing social structures or bringing about social change. In the current research then, implications of these discourses are elaborated on, including how poor Filipino youth are viewed or positioned, the actions made available for them to do, and how they are likely to think, feel, and behave with respect to a particular discourse. The broader relationship of the identified discourses is also tackled in terms of the extent to which they advocate for social change.

Review of related literature

Socioeconomic status and academic success

Among the factors that are deemed influential to academic success, socioeconomic status (SES) stands to be one of the most extensively studied (Farooq et al., 2011). The American Psychological Association (2017) defines SES as a broad term that encompasses multiple facets such as family's income, parents' educational attainment, and even one's perceptions of the available opportunities in life. Meanwhile, the measure of academic outcomes across the education literature has been largely based on students' grade point averages (Ghaemi & Yazdanpanah, 2014).

Most experts argue that low SES leads to poor academic outcomes as the more basic needs have yet to be addressed (Adams, 1996, as cited in Farooq et al., 2011). Such relegation of education to a secondary concern happens even in the context of the Filipino family. In a local study involving elementary students in a Philippine province, nutrition and the family's living conditions appeared to be the most predominant hindrance to students' academic performance (Alcuizar, 2016).

Aside from the direct influence of SES on the prioritization of resources, it has also been suggested to exert an impact on scholastic outcomes through psychological means. In field experiments for instance, low SES students were observed to increase their school motivation, and hence their performance, when they were

made to feel that opportunities for success were available (Destin, 2017).

Furthermore, students' growth mindset—the belief that their intelligence is malleable and their academic performance can thus be improved with effort—has been increasingly recognized as an important psychological factor in determining academic achievement. In a nationwide study in Chile, it was found that the assumption of a growth mindset was positively correlated with academic success across socioeconomic strata. In fact, it was even shown to be a comparably strong predictor of academic success as SES. The same study, however, documented that low SES students were less likely to hold a growth mindset compared to students with higher SES. But those low SES students who did exhibit a growth mindset fared better, such that students in the lowest 10th percentile of family income demonstrated a level of academic performance comparable to those students in the 80th income percentile who were less inclined to hold a growth mindset. These results suggest that the extent to which growth mindset is held by low SES students can greatly improve their chance for academic achievement (Claro et al., 2016).

Discourses involving socioeconomic status and education

In recent educational policy literature, the discussion on the neoliberal perspective has become prevalent. Within this discourse, education is essentially framed as a commodity that parents, as consumers, choose to avail for their children, regardless of their requisite resources to do so. Here, the responsibility of affording an education is shifted from the state to the parents and their children, such that any failure in completing an education is attributed to students and their families (Apple, 2005).

In response to this, some have begun focusing on the issues of justice and equality as well as their implications to specific populations such as students with low SES (Lester et al., 2016). This counter discourse of justice is elaborated on in an article published in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy in 2017. Here, several scholars argued that access to educational opportunities must be equal for all because of a couple of significant reasons. First, education provides opportunities for an individual's success in competing in the labor market, participating in democratic processes, and thriving as a human, in general. Second, education recognizes that one's life chances must not be determined by uncontrollable circumstances of birth such as social class. And it is in the intersection of education's instrumental value of enabling employment and the disadvantaged position of certain populations such as the poor where the matter of social and economic justice comes in. Hence, the role of the government in upholding justice lies in ensuring equality in educational opportunities. Education, in this sense, cannot be operated under the market principle. It has to be available to anyone, including those whose

parents are too poor to afford it (Shields et al., 2017).

Theoretical framework

Discourses pertain to sets of statements that talk about things or events in relatively coherent ways (Edley, 2001). They provide a means of constructing objects in particular cultural and historical contexts, producing forms of knowledge through the use of language (Hall, 1992). Discourses then create subject positions through which people locate and define themselves and play accompanying roles (Parker, 1994).

Consistent with the process of construction, Foucault (1980) focuses on the complex relationship of power and knowledge. As discourses make available certain ways of seeing and being in the world, the resulting representation or knowledge is viewed to be strongly implicated in the exercise of power (Willig, 2008). For instance, Foucault is concerned with how constructed knowledge wields control over people's lives. From a Foucauldian point of view, discourses serve to allow or constrain social practices vis-à-vis what can be said and done by whom, where, and when (Parker, 1992). Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) then seeks to examine the implications of discourses in people's social and psychological experiences, including how people are positioned, the actions they can engage in, as well as the possible thoughts and feelings they can experience within a discourse.

The following FDA stages were undertaken in this study following Willig's (2008) version.

1. Discursive constructions. These involve the various ways an object is constructed in the text. For this study, the academic success among poor Filipino youth was chosen as the object of focus, as Hya's valedictory texts exposed the different angles through which it is understood in society.
2. Discourses. These refer to the wider ways of understanding that locate the discursive constructions in a broader perspective, making their underlying assumptions and differences more apparent. In the education literature, for instance, socioeconomic, psychological, and justice discourses were noted. Depending on which discourse is activated, construal of the object and power ascribed to actors change. The present research aimed to analyze how academic success among poor Filipino youth is framed in these discourses.
3. Action orientation. This states the purpose that a discourse accomplishes in the text. In this study, the function of each discourse is discussed in terms of attributing or disclaiming capabilities from actors, such as whether poor Filipino youth stand to lose, benefit from, or contribute to their academic success, depending on the given discourse.
4. Positioning. This identifies the location from where people are viewed in society and the position they

take up in a discourse. This also covers the rights and duties ascribed to actors given their subject positions. In relation to this, the current research explored how poor Filipino youth are situated with respect to their pursuit of academic success within a particular discourse.

5. Practice. This provides or limits the possibilities of action that people can undertake given their positioning in a discourse. This also constitutes the expression of power that is granted to or withheld from actors in a certain discourse. In this research, practice addressed the question of how much power is afforded to poor Filipino youth in terms of what they can do or not do in their pursuit of academic success, given their positioning in a particular discourse.
6. Subjectivity. This encompasses what people may think, feel, and experience as a product of their positioning in a discourse. This demonstrates how pervasive the power of discourse can be in influencing individuals' psychological realities. This study aimed to infer the subjectivity embedded in the positioning of poor Filipino youth with respect to a given discourse on their academic success.

Continuing with the power/knowledge concept, Foucault also asserts that power can reinforce knowledge by breeding regimes of truth that can be so entrenched that they remain unquestioned and are taken as 'common sense.' Through this, prevailing discourses that favor specific versions of social reality are able to legitimize and perpetuate existing social structures and power relations. Because of the dynamic nature of language, however, alternative constructions become possible and counter discourses arise eventually, serving as mechanisms for social change (Willig, 2008). In this study, the broader relationship of discourses on academic success among poor Filipino youth is tackled as well as the implications in power relations and systematic change.

Method

This research examined the discourses surrounding the academic success among poor Filipino youth. Using ADMU Class 2019 valedictorian Reysel Hyacenth Bendaña or Hya's publicly available texts, (a) her qualifying essay 'Prayer for Generosity' (Bendaña, 2019a) and (b) actual speech 'Questioning the Hill' (Bendaña, 2019b), the present study utilized the qualitative approach of Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Data collection

Due to the richness of Hya's writings, these were deemed as an ample source of discourses for study. These texts aptly captured her contrasting experience of a remarkable academic success amid an impoverished background. More importantly, Hya did not just talk about her

Academic success among poor Filipino youth

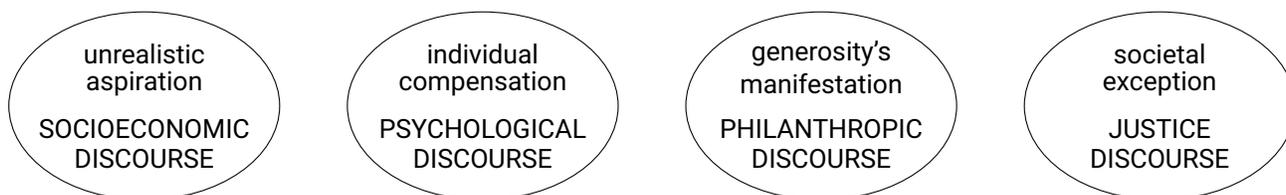


Figure 1. Summary of discursive constructions and discourses

own circumstances, but mostly related her academic success with that of the poor Filipino youth. With the uniqueness of her case and its illustration of a wider societal scenario, the feature of her story in several newspapers must be indicative of the relevance of discourses contained in it. Altogether, these characteristics make the subject texts worthy of study.

Data analysis

Following Willig’s (2008) version of Foucauldian discourse analysis, six steps were performed to analyze the data. The first two steps involved identifying different discursive constructions and locating them within the context of wider discourses. Here, I, as the researcher, read the text thrice. My first reading was done without conscious processing. During the second reading, I engaged with the text with the research question in mind, extracting the different ways through which academic success among poor Filipino youth was constructed. My third reading centered on checking the wider discourses against the text again. The next step entailed determining the action orientation or what the discourse does and accomplishes in the text. For this study, I analyzed what each of the discourses conveyed as doing in the text, such as attributing or disregarding agency from poor Filipino youth in their pursuit of academic success. The succeeding step pertained to distinguishing positions, which entailed me to identify the location of poor Filipino youth with respect to their rights to and responsibilities for their academic success. The last two steps covered the implications of positioning within a discourse on available practice and resulting subjectivity. In relation to this, I noted what poor Filipino youth are made to be able to do and not do and extended this to an inference on what they are likely to think and feel given their positioning on a particular discourse.

Results

Hya’s qualifying essay and valedictory speech did more than address the 2019 graduates of ADMU. It also conveyed the different ways by which academic success among poor Filipino youth is constructed in society at large. In this present study, four constructions and wider

discourses were identified. (See Figure 1.) These framed academic success in the context of poverty as (a) unrealistic aspiration under the socioeconomic discourse, (b) individual compensation under the psychological discourse, (c) generosity’s manifestation under the philanthropic discourse, and (d) societal exception under the justice discourse.

Socioeconomic discourse

The first discourse constructs academic success, in the form of completing an education, as an unrealistic aspiration among poor Filipino youth. In Hya’s essay, she stated that even fulfilling basic needs such as food was problematized in her family. She wrote, “I was raised in poverty—there was never enough food on our table. . .” (Bendaña, 2019a).

As her father and mother struggled to sufficiently provide for them, Hya and her siblings had to face difficulties in finding sustenance early on. Hya narrated this in the following text:

Dumating ako sa mundo bilang panganay ng isang construction worker at isang SM saleslady—parehas hindi regular at underpaid, kaya kahit nagsisikap, parehas hindi sapat ang inuuwi. Ang kabataan naming magkapatid ay maghanap ng tindahang mauutang ng pagkain dahil pagod nang magpautang ang mga tindahan sa kalye namin. [I came into the world as the eldest child of a construction worker and an SM (shopping store) saleslady. They were both contractual and underpaid, so no matter how hard they worked, their take-home pay was still not enough. My and my sibling’s childhood was spent searching for a remaining store that could extend us credit for food, as the ones in our street were already tired of lending to us.] (Bendaña, 2019b)

This constraint among poor Filipino youth also translates in the conflict between spending time in school and helping with the basic needs for the family. This was depicted in Hya’s recount of her encounter with Noynoy:

Nung high school ako, nagkaroon ako ng pagkakataon na magvolunteer magturo sa isang public school. Doon ko nakilala si Noynoy. ... Grade 1 si Noynoy noon, pero siya'y 12 years old. Apat na beses na siyang umulit ng Grade 1 noon kasi lagi siyang absent. Kailangan niya kasing kumita ng pambili ng pagkain para sa kanyang pamilya. [When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to become a volunteer teacher in a public school. There, I met Noynoy. ... he was in Grade 1 back then, but he was already 12 years old. He repeated Grade 1 four times, as he was always absent. He needed to earn money to buy food for his family.] (Bendaña, 2019b)

This burden is even made more pronounced considering the fees required for enrolment and allowance in going to school. Hya described this in her own story:

Ilang beses na nag-sorry sa akin mga magulang ko kasi hindi sila makakabayad ng tuition in time for the exam o dahil sa susunod na linggo pa sila makakapagpadala ng allowance. [For a number of times, my parents apologized to me since they could not pay my tuition in time for the exam, or because they could only send my allowance by the following week.] (Bendaña, 2019b)

... as students, my sister and I had childhoods filled with promissory notes for delayed tuition fee payments. (Bendaña, 2019a)

The socioeconomic discourse thus identifies poverty as the “biggest barrier to education” that makes “graduation from any university ... not a realistic dream” (Bendaña, 2019b) and where poor Filipino youth stand to lose given their circumstance. In addressing the Atenean audience and citing different prohibitions in school, Hya made this stark claim about poverty:

In one way or another, we all experience barriers that make it difficult for us to achieve certain goals. But in the real world, the biggest barrier to education is not forgetting IDs, having hold orders, or violating dress code, but poverty. (Bendaña, 2019b)

The socioeconomic discourse then locates poor Filipino youth in a passive and negative stance, that is, as victims of lack. With its focus on material resources, this discourse positions poor Filipino youth as deprived of their rights, essentially taking power away from them. In practice, they will find it difficult to access opportunities to education, perpetuating the existing social structures

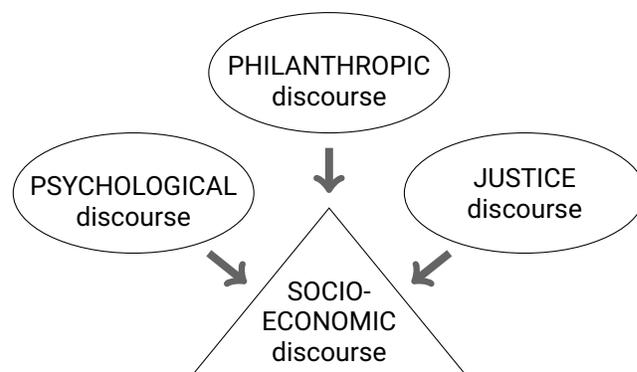


Figure 2. Relationship of discourses

that disadvantage them. As an implication to their subjectivity, poor Filipino youth may feel discouraged and hopeless over their slim chances of attaining an education, further reinforcing it as an unrealistic aspiration, as the socioeconomic discourse constructs it.

The succeeding discourses then attempt to counter the socioeconomic discourse by presenting different ways through which academic success among poor Filipino youth may be made possible, offering them a change in positioning, practice, and subjectivity. Hence, Figure 2 shows a more apt representation of the four discourses.

Psychological discourse

Within the psychological discourse, academic success among poor Filipino youth is constructed as a form of individual compensation in response to their underprivileged background. This discursive construction was shown in Hya’s narrative where she alluded to her journey in making it to the Ateneo:

My father is a jeepney driver, whose example taught me to work harder than everyone else—not only because hard work is high dignity but also, while it is no guarantee of success, anything less than that for us would mean complete failure. I always worked harder than everyone else to get the same opportunities they had. It’s the least I can do to compensate for my lack of privilege. (Bendaña, 2019a)

Here, hard work is emphasized as a means to make up for one’s poverty, where poor Filipino youth stand to benefit from their inner resources and private coping mechanisms to succeed. As in Hya’s case, this meant extending her efforts outside of school and taking on the responsibility of helping her family. In her essay, Hya shared, “This is a reality of life I have long embraced: shouting as jeepney barker for my father to taking odd

jobs in high school. I worked hard to be here” (Bendaña, 2019a).

The psychological discourse then situates poor Filipino youth in a more positive and active state, as capable individuals who can transcend their material deficiencies through their own effort. This positioning allows them to reclaim their rights with the condition of taking personal responsibility for striving. As a resulting action, they will refuse to resign to their circumstance and be pitied upon because of their situation. Rather, they will work harder to outdo their poverty and find ways to finish their studies, which practice affords them an extent of power within their own level. This may make them feel empowered and proud out of being able to toil for and earn opportunities to education they initially lacked. They may however feel frustrated if their striving does not prove fruitful as they anticipated. Since the sense of empowerment in the psychological discourse is confined within an individual level, nothing is changed in the existing social structures and power relations. The same material circumstances and imbalance in societal resources may continue to limit the poor Filipino youth toward attaining an education.

Philanthropic discourse

The philanthropic discourse, on the other hand, constructs academic success among poor Filipino youth as a manifestation of generosity. With this, the importance of others’ benevolence is underscored in granting educational opportunities among poor Filipino youth. Hya’s acknowledgment in her speech demonstrated this as she said, “As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t be standing here today if it weren’t for the generosity of those who helped me get here” (Bendaña, 2019b).

The philanthropic discourse furthermore counters the psychological discourse insofar as academic success among poor Filipino youth is concerned. After affirming her hard work, Hya ascertained that in the absence of others’ generosity, her own striving would have been in vain, and her story of academic success not possible. Her words expressed this sentiment vividly:

Yet, I am aware that my full scholarship exists not because I simply earned it. All my work would have been for nothing if there was no slot on offer in the first place. I am here because someone, by the grace of their heart, gave generously to fund my education. I am here because a generous Ateneo exists, where someone like me who does not share the wealthier background of the common Ate- nean can be entrusted with the Presidency of the school’s Student Council. (Bendaña, 2019a)

Within the philanthropic discourse, poor Filipino youth

are positioned in a more passive stance, that is, as beneficiaries of others’ kindness. This consequently disclaims their right to assert and makes the existing social inequalities even more apparent as poor Filipino youth stand to depend and receive from the more privileged. Following this discourse, poor Filipino youth will then have to recognize the limits of their personal effort and admit their need for assistance, fortifying the power relations that put them at the mercy of others’ generosity. As such, poor Filipino youth may feel grateful for the presence of help or resentful in the absence of it.

Justice discourse

Among the discourses, it is the discourse of justice where Hya’s essay and speech gravitated on. In consideration of the status quo, academic success among poor Filipino youth remains to be constructed as a societal exception. Hya admitted that “people do not expect much from children of poor families” which makes her “[exceed] expectations” (Bendaña, 2019a) and her “story [being] celebrated, even romanticized, for its sheer improbability” (Bendaña, 2019b). While Hya recognized herself as an “example of the underprivileged gaining the highest quality of education in one of the best universities in the country” (Bendaña, 2019a), she reiterated how many poor Filipino youth are hindered from reaching the same dream. Hya’s statements made this clear:

... while it is a place that I have been able to reach, it remains beyond the hopes of many of our fellow citizens. My success is an exception, not the norm: rarely do we see a child from the poorest of the poor climb her way up to one of the top universities in the country... (Bendaña, 2019a)

In the same way the philanthropic discourse countered the sufficiency of the psychological discourse as presented earlier, so does the justice discourse counter the adequacy of the philanthropic discourse. With the Ateneo as the model of generosity, Hya pronounced these straightforward statements:

... generosity is not enough. The success of one person should not depend on the virtue of another. ... it will take more than good intentions. Ateneo taught me the limits of what individual virtue can do. A generous Ateneo alone cannot make up for a society that does not provide fair access to opportunity for all, and a decent path to success for those who are like me. (Bendaña, 2019a)

The justice discourse then exposes the inequality within society that narrows the chances of poor Filipino youth toward academic success. Hya’s words captured this:

As long as society has not overcome bigger, deeper problems—social discrimination, stark economic inequality, and the concentration of political power in the hands of the few—there will always be something better to struggle for. (Bendaña, 2019b)

The justice discourse then argues that access to quality education must be made available to all, where poor Filipino youth stand to benefit from and contribute to the advocacy for equal educational opportunities. Instead of being a societal exception, academic success among poor Filipino youth must then be a norm in society. Here, power is distributed as opportunities are not confined to the privileged, but made available to the impoverished. This action orientation of the justice discourse is the one that can ultimately bring about social change, where systemic impediments such as poverty need not define and perpetuate itself among poor Filipino youth. Academic success can then be transformed from an unrealistic aspiration to a dream within reach among poor Filipino youth. Hya's statements painted this reality:

Sa isang makatarungang lipunan, hindi na natatangi ang kwento ng isang iskolar na gaya ko, pero isa nang realidad sa sinumang nangangarap. Sa isang makatarungang lipunan, ang edukasyon gaya ng atin ay hindi na para lang sa iilan. Sa isang makatarungang lipunan, mas marami pa sana tayong kasamang magtatapos ngayon. [In a just society, the [success] story of a scholar like me is no longer an exception, but a reality for anyone who dreams. In a just society, an education like ours is no longer for the few. In a just society, many more [youth] could have graduated with us today.] (Bendaña, 2019b)

Within the justice discourse, poor Filipino youth are then positioned in a positive and active stance, with the right to education and responsibility for co-defending it. As an available practice, they can partner with other sectors in striving to transform society to becoming more equal and just. Hya shared this vision with the Ateneo community in the following text:

Pero kahit hindi makatarungan ang mundong minana natin[,] kasama natin ang kapwa kabataan, mga magsasaka't manggagawa, mga guro't kawani, mga lingkod-bayan, at marami pang ibang sektor ng lipunan, sa paglikha ng mundong ito. [But even if the world we inherited is not just, our fellow youth, farmers and laborers, teachers and administrators, public servants, and many more other sectors in society, are with us in creating this world.]

At ito ang hamon sa ating lahat. Bumuo tayo at mag-iwan ng isang Pilipinas na mas makatarungan kaysa sa lipunang dinatnan natin, isang lipunan na ikararantal nating ipamana. [And this is the challenge to all of us. Let us build and leave a Philippines that is more just than the one handed down to us, a society we will be proud to pass on.] (Bendaña, 2019b)

With this, poor Filipino youth are afforded the subjectivity of having a compelling mission and a deep sense of hope, not only for their selves, but for future generations as well.

Discussion

Discourse and counter discourses

Results of the current study showed four constructions of and wider discourses surrounding the academic success among poor Filipino youth. Consistent with Adams's (1996, as cited in Farooq et al., 2011) proposition on the relegation of education in favor of addressing more basic needs, the prevailing socioeconomic discourse constructed the academic success among poor Filipino youth as an unrealistic aspiration in the context of the status quo.

In an attempt to change this construction, counter discourses have emerged. Being made to feel that opportunities can be available (Destin, 2017) even when these have to be earned through hard work and that effort can improve academic outcomes despite one's poverty (Claro et al., 2016) renders some agency to poor Filipino youth within the psychological discourse. Challenging this however is the philanthropic discourse that bares the limitations of such inner resources and highlights the need for dependence of poor Filipino youth on the more privileged. For both the psychological and philanthropic discourses, the assumption of the neoliberal discourse on education becomes evident, as the responsibility of obtaining an education is essentially individualized and assigned to families and students (Apple, 2005) or any willing sponsors by extension, disclaiming the state's duty of affording its citizens their basic right to education.

The justice discourse then serves to uncover and question the deeper inequalities that underlie the argument for compensation through hard work or receiving generosity that the psychological and philanthropic discourses advance. In line with Shields et al. (2017), the justice discourse contends that educational opportunities must be made equal to all. This is since education is linked with opportunities at work, civic engagement, and personal growth, all of which are integral to being human. In light of upsetting the status quo, the justice

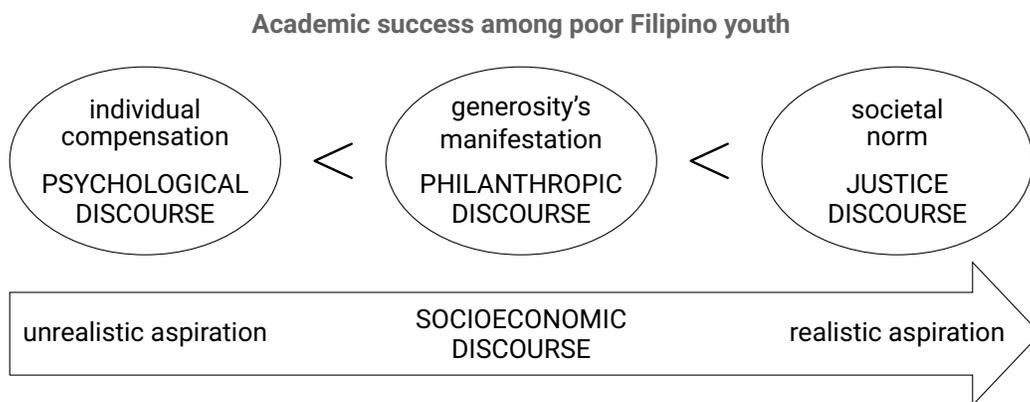


Figure 3. Relationship of discursive constructions and discourses

discourse advocates for equality, turning academic success among poor Filipino youth into a societal norm where obtaining an education for the disadvantaged is already a realistic aspiration. The relationship of these discourse and counter discourses can be captured by the representation in Figure 3.

On power and social change

The findings of this research may also be evaluated in view of their implications on power and social change. With Foucault’s (1980) concept of power/knowledge, it can be seen how constructed knowledge through discourses can either exercise control over or grant power to people. Depending on the dominant institutions or actors in society, their favored representations of reality are preserved. Only counter discourses that challenge the underlying assumptions of the existing social reality and power relations can systematically advance social change.

In the context of this study, the socioeconomic and philanthropic discourses position poor Filipino youth in a passive state, leaving them as victims of lack or mere beneficiaries of kindness. Here, power remains to be concentrated among the affluent whose resources grant them the capacity to limit or open opportunities for the poor. In turn, the dominance of the elite in society can perpetuate this representation of reality where poor Filipino youth can do so little to attain an education and improve their circumstance.

The psychological discourse meanwhile locates poor Filipino youth in a more active position, giving an emphasis on their personal power to direct their life outcomes through striving. This discourse however bears the risk of blaming individuals for not laboring hard enough if their pursuits do not culminate to the desired results. By focusing the issue within an individual level, the psychological discourse can also serve to disregard the inherent disadvantage among poor Filipino youth in terms of their lack of access to educational opportunities. It

can endorse subscription to private coping mechanisms such as hard work where prevailing social structures and power relations continue to restrain the poor Filipino youth from exerting some change in their circumstance. Hence, the psychological discourse only provides an extent of power within an individual level, but it is not sufficient in bringing about social transformation.

The justice discourse then strongly questions the wider inequalities that put a precondition to attaining an education among poor Filipino youth and counters this with the argument for equality in opportunities. Consequently, it provides collective power to the poor Filipino youth who are positioned to be entitled to the same rights to education as everyone else. It allows the disadvantaged to have options and means to attain life outcomes previously made unavailable to them. As this is not yet the case in our present society, the justice discourse challenges the existing social structures that concentrate power among the few and calls for social change where opportunities to education and life are made equally accessible to all. Here, the poor Filipino youth, the rest of the disadvantaged groups, and the different sectors in society stand to contribute to a more just allocation of power and a systematic transformation of society.

Reflexivity

The topic of academic success in the context of poverty is one that is very close to my heart. As someone who succeeded academically despite being confronted with financial struggles during my college years, I have been drawn to examine similar experiences and stories that resonate strengths within individuals.

My approach then as a researcher has been largely personal, owing to the manner through which I managed to thrive in life—mostly by means of my own hard work and others’ help. While I initially planned to adopt an interpretative phenomenological analysis consistent with my orientation, the use of discourse methodology appeared more fitting and efficient given the publicly

available data ready for analysis. Ironically, this proved harder, for employing a discursive approach entailed recognizing broader societal forces and implications which often revealed aspects that constrict and limit, which run counter to my optimistic disposition in life.

My consultations with my research professors helped me deal with and make sense of this ideological discomfort, ultimately resulting to this reflexivity. My deeper engagement with the text through repeated reading helped me articulate the underlying assumptions and social implications surrounding my topic, which I would have otherwise dismissed given my bias toward inner resources and individual coping.

In the end, my decision to use discourse analysis proved personally enriching, as this helped me broaden my perspective and understand how influential discourses are in shaping social outcomes and affecting personal subjectivity. Foucault's focus on power and social change also re-enlivened my sense of advocacy, forcing me to recognize more systemic underpinnings of experience and stirring me to challenge more deeply rooted impediments to growth. Lastly, completing this research also made me realize that while studying discourses can confront researchers like myself with disheartening realities, understanding them better equally equips us with the power to promote counter discourses that can address inequalities and offer better possibilities.

I share with Hya's hope—that academic success among poor Filipino youth can become a more realistic aspiration in a more just and equal society. And we all have a part to play in believing, adopting, and creating discourses that can reinforce this desired reality.

Conclusion

The current research examined the discourses surrounding the academic success among poor Filipino youth using Hya's valedictory texts. Here, the prevailing socioeconomic discourse underscored poverty as a significant barrier to academic success. Counter discourses, such as psychological, philanthropic, and justice discourses, provided alternative positioning, practice, and subjectivity among poor Filipino youth. Among these discourses, it is the justice discourse that put forth the most inclusive and empowering route to social change, as it advocates for redistributing power and granting equal opportunities to all.

Although the discourses presented in this study may not be exhaustive and their dynamics may be more complex than their illustration here, this research is a significant step toward understanding the discourses on academic success within a disadvantaged group, specifically the poor Filipino youth. The current research particularly elucidated the discourses' implications on power,

positioning, practice, and subjectivity among poor Filipino youth, as well as the consequent contribution of discourses in perpetuating existing social realities or bringing about social change.

Discourses that inspire hope, equalize power, and bring about social change like the justice discourse then need to be cultivated and promoted. Because in the end, to adopt a discourse is to approximate its reality, even imperfectly and no matter how gradually.

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