

# From Scribes to Seers: 400 Years of Doing Social Science in the Philippines

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the “doing” or practice of social science in the Philippines in the past 400 years where written documents are available during this period. It consists of three parts. First is a discussion of popular perceptions of the social sciences, often disaggregated and with particular stereotypes, e.g., history as “heroes and dates”, geography as “maps”, psychology as “behavior” and anthropology as “(exotic) tribes”. These focused perceptions lead to misconceptions of the social sciences as mainly descriptive pursuits that produce studies that are “nice to know” but which have little impact on society, especially for developing countries. Secondly, a historical survey will show how, in the past 400 years, the practice of social sciences has significantly contributed towards understanding the Philippines, with even greater challenges and potential, in the future for producing insights needed to effectively respond to social concerns. This includes the emergence of social sciences in Europe in the context of the Enlightenment, and its impact on the thinking of social reformers. In the Philippines, this would be exemplified by Jose Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes with their unrelenting search for a Filipino identity and nationhood. The American colonial period is described in terms of its more formal definition and application of the social sciences for governance, including social engineering with its long-term impact on many aspects of public life. In the postcolonial period, Filipino social scientists followed international trends of separating the social sciences from the natural sciences, as well as arts and humanities, with academic institutions developing discipline-based silos of research. Despite the fragmentation, there have been common themes in the disciplines, particularly in a search for the “indigenous”, taking up in a sense the agenda of Rizal and de los Reyes in the late nineteenth century. Applied social sciences have also become important to better inform development efforts and have allowed greater convergence, and the adoption of inter- and transdisciplinary research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Public perceptions of the social sciences in the Philippines, and in other countries as well, tend to disaggregate the disciplines, sometimes even confounding them. I have been invited to guest on television and have been called a sociologist, a psychologist, a historian and, rarely, an anthropologist.

Where people recognize the individual social sciences, there is a tendency to stereotype the disciplines. Historians are associated with the study of the past and memorizing dates. Geographers are identified with maps. “Behavior” is that catch-all term assigned to sociologists and psychologists. Anthropologists are probably the most exotic of the social science professions, because we are perceived to solely study exotic tribes. Even more problematically, social scientists are seen to pursue esoteric research subjects; for example, I have lost count of the times I have been asked to talk about the *aswang*. Social scientists, sadly, are seen almost as dilettantes, pursuing research that are “nice to know” but have little impact on society.

My paper today takes off from the theme of the meeting, “Looking Back, Looking Forward”, taking on a historical approach to show how, in the past 400 years, the practice—the “doing”— of social sciences has significantly contributed toward understanding the Philippines, and Filipinos, with even greater challenges, and potential for providing insights needed to effectively respond to social concerns.

I draw inspiration here from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Filipino social scientist who I will not name yet. A wise man, he counsels us: “In order to read the destiny of a people, it

is necessary to open the book of its past.” Note how I am using the term “the practice” of the social sciences, following concerns that scientists need to demythologize our professions, emphasizing how our pursuit of knowledge can be most practical, if not sensible, and that research is “doing” something.

### Early Social Science

Some of you may be surprised by my reference to 400 years, considering that the social sciences formally emerged in Western Europe only around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with some disciplines, such as political science and psychology, coming even later.

But I wanted to emphasize that the term “social science” is itself a social construct, associated with the Enlightenment. The identification of the social sciences with Western Europe tends to devalue the work of scholars from other parts of the world, and from earlier centuries, who did in fact systematically study societies, asking questions that remain relevant today about humanity, society, and behavior. To name a few: the Greek Herodotus (494–425 BCE), the Chinese Sima Qian (145–86 BCE), or the Arab Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406); all of whom pioneered in the systematic study of history, combined with what we would call geography, political science, demography, and even psychology.

For the Philippines, I use “400 years” to date the “doing” of social sciences, beginning with the Spanish colonizers

because this covers the period where we have available written materials.

We begin with the early Spanish colonial chronicles coming mainly from missionaries, with often detailed accounts of what they saw in the Philippines, accompanied by commentaries that were often tinged by racial and religious biases but which were, and still are, useful for understanding our past.

Some examples of the work:

Many dictionaries and word lists (*vocabulario*) were produced by the Spanish friars for Tagalog, Cebuano, Kapampangan, and other languages. The dictionaries were produced to help the Spaniards with missionary work but in recent years several have been reprinted, even translated and annotated, because they are considered valuable for anyone interested in reconstructing our past.

The work around the dictionaries and *vocabulario* was not easy, a time without typewriters or computers. An example is *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala*, with only two priests listed as authors: Juan de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar but was in fact the product of several generations of missionaries, starting with the Dominicans Francisco Blancas de San Jose and Tomas de los Reyes in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, whose compilations got as far as the letter D. The lists were passed on to the Jesuits Pablo Clain (also referred to as Paul Klein and who was Czech), Francisco Jansens, and Jose Fernandez. Another Jesuit, Juan de Noceda, “inherited” these materials and spent 30 years expanding the lists: “Noceda verified each word for its proper stress, accent, and meaning. Bent on achieving accuracy, he approved the introduction of an entry word

only after consensus was gained from 12 local individuals proficient in Tagalog” (Postma:xiv).

Noceda died in 1747 and his work was taken over by a Spanish-Tagalog mestizo and Jesuit Pedro de Sanlucar, who completed the work and published it in 1754 (see Francisco:101).

The *vocabulario* was apparently popular, leading to reprints in 1834 and 1860. Reflecting the importance of the work, the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino had the book translated and annotated by Virgilio Almario, Elvin Ebreo, and Anna Maria Yglopaz, all from the University of the Philippines. This new edition was reprinted in 2013, a valuable resource not just for linguistics scholars but also historians and anthropologists.

Going beyond dictionaries, we find many publications that provide detailed information on society and culture during the 300 years of Spanish colonialism. One of the most comprehensive was the work of the Jesuit Ignacio Alcina, whose three-volume “*Historia de las Islas e Indios de Bisayas*”, published in 1668, documented flora and fauna, natural history, language, religion, health and healing, and much more, in the Visayas (mostly Samar). The three books have been translated and published by the UST Publishing House, waiting to be used by more scholars, even as it provides for more leisurely reading. Consider, for example, how Alcina (3:85) was captivated by the performance of two musical instruments, the *kuriapi* and the *kurlung*: “What is really unusual about these instruments. . . is that as if they speak one to one another: that is, as if asking questions and answering (each other)

simply with the strings and sounds of both instruments.”

Certainly, there was ethnocentrism in the work of Alcina and many other Spaniards, with the *indios* depicted as primitive and barbaric, but their output is still admirable. Some of them wrote with great sympathy for the *indio* and this should not be surprising. Salazar’s (2012) exhaustive review of Philippine linguistics quotes advice from an anonymous friar about learning local languages: *un año de arte y dos de bahag*, one year of learning and two of the *bahag* or loincloth, a way of saying one had to integrate and immerse with the communities.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, accompanying the emergence of the social sciences was public discussions of economic and social issues. As the printing press became more widely available, small newspapers proliferated in cities throughout the world, including the Philippines, with public intellectuals providing incisive, and sometimes bold, commentaries about current events. Mojares (2017) describes a proliferation of newspapers and books in the 19<sup>th</sup> century patronized by a small but growing literate middle-class. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see these public intellectuals becoming bolder, as with the overseas Propaganda Movement and with the underground press of the *Katipunan* in the Philippines. What we see then is a move away from the work of scribes describing events, toward seers analyzing events and its implications for the future.

These “seers” included the members of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Propaganda Movement, who initially wanted reforms that would allow the Philippines representation in the Spanish *Cortes* or

Parliament. Most of them were exiles writing from Spain, the most famous one being Jose Rizal.

Rizal is recognized as a renaissance man and a polymath. Physician, educator, engineer, agriculturist. Name it and he seemed to have acquired some expertise in the field, but he is rarely mentioned as an ethnologist and philologist, consulted for his wide knowledge of cultures and languages.

Rizal’s political reforms drew on an unrelenting search for knowledge, exemplified by the name of his sculpture, The Triumph of Science over Death, and his social science writings were tools for political reform. For example, he was intent on proving that there was a Filipino civilization before the Spaniards arrived, as exemplified by his critical annotations to Antonio Morga’s *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, published almost three centuries earlier.

Rizal and his contemporary Isabelo de los Reyes (1864-1938) collected folklore as part of a search for the Filipino, and a contribution towards Filipino identity and nationhood. Inadvertently then, the Spanish chronicles, critically reviewed by Rizal, contributed to the shaping of the Filipino, a term previously reserved for Spaniards born in the Philippines and appropriated by the revolutionaries to refer to the *indio*.

We see in Rizal a move toward doing science, not just describing but analyzing society. The classic example is Rizal’s “The Indolence of the Filipino”, (Rizal 1913) where he disputes the Spanish colonizers’ stereotyping of the *indio* as being naturally lazy. Rizal questions the very concept of indolence, and presents several theories to

explain why the *indio* behaved in a way that invited such a label.

Rizal's "Indolence" is incisive, and later inspired a Malaysian sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas, to write about how the British contributed to the myth of the lazy native in Malaya. The works of Rizal and Alatas are worth reading today as we tackle questions of underdevelopment. Rizal's "Indolence" is required reading not just in Rizal's Life and Times course but in many social science courses.

Anthropologists were considered important in aiding the colonial administrators in their task of social engineering that during the American colonial period, several American anthropologists were deployed to the Philippines. So important were anthropologists that one of them—David Barrows—was appointed as the first director of the Bureau of Education.

Sadly and unfortunately, the work of the anthropologists produced one of most persistent problems we have today: the marginalization of the "native"—used to refer to indigenous peoples. The colonial powers exoticized our "natives" by displaying us in international exhibitions and expositions, for example the Philippine Exposition of 1887 in Madrid and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, and in their books and journals, Filipinos have sometimes been complicit with works that marginalize the Igorots (Cordillera), Mangyans (Mindoro), Lumads (Mindanao), and our Muslims.

A young H. Otley Beyer visited the St. Louis Exposition, which sparked his interest in the Philippines. He ended up in the Philippines as part of the colonial bureaucracy and went on to establish the anthropology department at the University

of the Philippines. He took up and developed a 19<sup>th</sup> century theory of wave migration—the idea that Negritos first settled the Philippines, followed by "Indonesians" and then the "Malayans". This theory pervaded the public imagination when it was popularized in comic form through the Evening News (Beyer and de Veyra 1947).

This wave migration theory has long been debunked, but remains popular among non-anthropologists. Unfortunately, the theory is sometimes used to support racial discrimination, with the waves seen as corresponding to the primitive and the savage, sometimes even accompanied by the idea that colonialism brought civilization to the Philippines.

### Postcolonial period

In the postcolonial period, Filipino social scientists have followed international trends of separating the social sciences from the natural sciences, as well as the arts and humanities, with academic institutions developing discipline-based silos of research. Despite the uncoupling, there have been common themes in the disciplines, particularly in a search for the "indigenous", taking up the agenda of Rizal and de los Reyes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeology and biological anthropology—areas with great potential for collaboration between natural and social scientists— are helping us to reconstruct the past, and understand who we are. An example is a special issue of Philippine Studies (Aguilar 2015) featuring genetics, linguistics, and ethnographic studies. I have to emphasize though that for such studies to be useful, they must be truly collaborative and should not allow the privileging of biology and

genetics. I worry about genetic determinism producing a new version of racialization, and a reduction of who we are to our DNA and genes, instead of celebrating the many encounters of diverse societies and cultures that shaped our being Filipino.

Applied social sciences have also become important to better inform development efforts. These applied social sciences have allowed greater convergence, and the adoption of inter- and transdisciplinary research. My own field is medical anthropology and my colleagues and I have been looking into such diverse and contemporary issues as the Filipino obsession with height and the use of skin-whiteners.

Filipino social scientists have been voices too in international bodies and important conventions. Examples are three National Scientists: Encarnacion Alzona, Gelia Castillo, and Mercedes Concepcion. Alzona was among the pioneers of UNESCO, Castillo a founder of rural sociology, and Mercedes Concepcion a pioneer in developing demographics in the Philippines.

The imprint of the social sciences can be illustrated by workshops organized by NAST PHL last year, several by the Social Sciences Division, but even in the topics of other divisions' workshops, you will find that there is room for social science research and analysis:

- Hazards, Risk, and Profits of Reclamation
- Linking Poverty Reduction and Agricultural Development
- Farm Integration, Intensification, and Diversification
- *Sentenaryo ng Teoryang General Relativity*
- Energy Storage Technologies
- Predatory Journals and Conferences

- Climate Change and Philippine Marine Resources
- From Monocrops to Systems
- Current Status of Basic Medical Education in the Philippines
- Philippine Transportation
- Reconfiguring Primary Health Care within the Context of *Kalusugan Pangkalahatan*

### An Agenda for the Future

The quote I gave at the beginning, about learning from the past, is from Rizal, and today's social scientists must take that advice seriously. Appropriately, we revisit Rizal's 1890 prophetic work, "The Philippines: A Century Hence" to find directions for the next century.

I would like to discuss five contemporary concerns where social scientists must play the roles of both scribes and seers. Like the Spanish compilers of word lists, and taking heed of Rizal's admonition to learn from the past, scientists must continue to build on the work of earlier scholars.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* made waves with the assertion that rapid social changes were causing "shock", making it more difficult for societies to make vital decisions. In 1980, Toffler's *Third Wave* proposed that after the agricultural and industrial revolutions, we were going through an information revolution, with far-reaching impacts on society. Toffler was prophetic, looking today at how the new digital information technologies, especially the Internet and social media, have reshaped societies, including our own. Social scientists need to study and analyze these developments and recommend policies that can better tap the potential for public good, even as we deal with many

unanticipated adverse effects on social life.

Among the social scientists, economists are the ones called most often to “forecast” the future. Our NAST PHL Social Science Division has economists who constantly remind us about going beyond the cold economic statistics and to look at human development. The economists are there as well to critique current models of development. One of the SSD-sponsored fora last year analyzed how the Philippines might be falling into the “middle-income trap”, where we emphasized the development of services, at the cost of neglecting manufacturing and agriculture.

Environmental issues, particularly climate change, have become crucial for countries like the Philippines. The research for disaster mitigation cannot be done by natural scientists alone. In 1987, The International Geosphere Biosphere Program coined the term “Great Acceleration” (see Morais 2015) to highlight how human activities have adversely affected the geo- and biospheres. Given this situation, environment and sustainability issues must be tackled by researchers from both the social and natural sciences.

Social scientists must look at emerging social phenomena, and the most important one we see today is the rise of populism: politicians are able to capitalize on social discontent to get themselves elected into positions of power. The rise of populists has challenged earlier theories around social change, revolutionary movements and much more. An understanding of Rodrigo Duterte’s rise to the presidency, and his style of governance, will require

scientists to review the work on Philippine culture and values, politics, and economy.

We live in perilous times, and in a dangerous place. Where are we headed for, or what should we aim for? Rizal in his “The Philippines a Century Hence” starts out with a description of where Filipinos were in his time, a description that could well apply to us in 2016, as well as an optimistic prophecy for better times. Permit me a rather long quote:

“Very likely the Philippines will defend with inexpressible valor the liberty secured at the price of so much blood and sacrifice. With the new men that will spring from their soil and with the recollection of their past, they will perhaps strive to enter freely upon the wide road of progress and all will labor together to strengthen their fatherland, both internally and externally, with the same enthusiasm with which a youth falls again to tilling the land of his ancestors, so long wasted and abandoned through the neglect of those who have withheld it from him. Then the mines will be made to give up their gold for relieving distress, iron for weapons, copper, lead, and coal. Perhaps the country will revive the maritime and mercantile life for which the islanders are fitted by their nature, ability and instincts, and once more free, like the bird that leaves its cage, like the flower that unfolds to the air, will recover the pristine virtues that are gradually dying out and will again become addicted to peace— cheerful, happy, joyous, hospitable, and daring.”

Rizal’s vision should inspire us to work together— social scientists and natural scientists, engineers, and health professionals— to craft a common future.

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