

Bahala Na as an Expression of the Filipino's Courage, Hope, Optimism, Self-efficacy and Search for the Sacred

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The literature on bahala na has largely focused on its negative qualities such as its seeming equivalence with dependence and fatalism. However, bahala na actually finds its roots in the spiritual core of the value system of the Filipinos, hence should be an expression of something desirable and worthy. This research aimed to refocus our attention and explore the positive side of bahala na in the context of five strengths: hope, self-efficacy, optimism, courage, and search for the sacred. Two focus group discussions were conducted in Metro Manila involving 11 and 13 participants respectively coming from a middle class village and an urban poor community. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data. Results show that while bahala na retains some of its more popular negative aspects, the predominant view suggests a rational assessment of one's resources and the situation which leads to a series of goal-attainment activities. It was also discovered that socio-economic status is a factor in the way bahala na was used in the context of hope, self-efficacy, and search for the sacred.

Keywords: bahala na, optimism, value system, Filipino values

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Mahirap talagang magmahal ng syota ng iba
O sakit ng ulo maniwala ka
Mahirap o, mahirap talaga
Maghanap na lang kaya ng iba
Ngunit kapag nakita ang kanyang mga mata
Nawawala ang aking pagkadismaya
Sige na, sugod na, oh, bahala na
Bahala na kung magkabistuhan pa

(It really is difficult to love someone else's girl
 Believe me, it will give you a headache
 It really is very difficult
 Should I just find someone else?
 But whenever I see her eyes
 My exasperation vanishes
 Go on, go ahead, i'll just go for it
 Let's just see what happens if we're found out)

- *Mahirap magmahal ng syota ng iba*
 sung by the Apo Hiking Society

The lover singing this song portrays a seemingly careless abandon in the desire to pursue the object of his fantasy. This person is taking a big risk, even negating the consequence of a possible heartbreak or perhaps physical injury to be inflicted by the rightful lover. With the utterance of *bahala na*, he proceeds to pursue his ladylove.

The context in which *bahala na* is used here reflects a popular usage of the term. Interestingly, a review of our local history would show that *bahala na* actually falls under the rubric of the Filipino value system (Enriquez, 1993; Jocano, 1997). This means that it is a cultural value that has to be regarded as desirable and worthy. Unfortunately, a negative depiction of *bahala na* by several writers has stamped an unfavorable stigma on this local phenomenon (De Mesa, 1979). Although Lagmay (as cited in Enriquez, 1993) found that Filipinos would generally not run away from a difficult situation, his emphasis on the risk-taking and confrontative nature of the Filipinos cast them in a negative light. Likewise, the publication of the *Osias Readers* in 1940 that equated the term with "oriental fatalism or resignation", (Jocano, 1997, p. 113) also contributed to the situation. This paper aims to reexamine the positiveness of *bahala na*, which can also be viewed as an attempt to put us back on track in discussing it in an affirmative manner. For one, focusing on one's strengths can promote positive thoughts and

enhance one's outlook and behavior in life (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Indeed, for an ordinary Filipino to use a concept such as *bahala na* as a possible source of positivity already merits this second look.

DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON *BAHALA NA*

Three contrasting views provide the background of the origin of *bahala na* (Jocano, 1997; Fonseca, Santos & Vilela, 2005). Primary among these is its religious connotation that traces its roots to pre-Spanish conquest of the archipelago. Another view equates *bahala na* with the concept of fatalism, that is, a belief that all things are predetermined and are therefore inevitable. Lastly, *bahala na* is viewed as an expression of positive Filipino traits and values.

Bahala Na as Relying on *Bathala's Will*

It is said that prior to the arrival of the Spaniards in the Philippines, the Malay race was the predominant race in the country and its attendant beliefs served as the backdrop of the predominant religion. This religion promoted the belief in *Bathala*, a kind and omnipotent being who is the provider of all things for man. Believing that whatever happens is *Bathala's* will, the Filipinos of long ago heavily relied on this divine entity, fueling a risk-taking behavior in the assurance that "*Bathala* will always take care" (Jocano, 1981, p.5).

Bahala Na as Fatalism

Fatalism is characterized by passive acceptance of the twists and turns in life that leads one to lose the confidence and determination to take action that will possibly get him out of a predicament. De Mesa (1979) discusses this further in the context of the *gulong ng kapalaran* (wheel of fortune) which shows that whatever the turn of fate is, one simply has to accept it since we are powerless to change its course. Other researchers simply define it as a practice characterized by sheer avoidance of responsibility (De Mesa, 1979; Jocano, 1999; Andres, 1985). The proverbial picture of Juan Tamad lying under the guava tree waiting for the fruit to fall serves as the quintessential model of a person having a *bahala na* mentality. Together, these researchers seem to imply that assuming a *bahala na* mentality is an informed choice to allow things to happen with a decision to withdraw from engaging into an action, believing that whatever is fated to happen, will happen.

The 'Positiveness' of *Bahala Na*

The popularity of the negative connotation of *bahala na* lends to the ease of using this concept when one decides not to take responsibilities, make excuses, fall short of their actions, etc. This is unfortunate because it has eclipsed the positive angle by which *bahala na* is viewed by some. The current perspective of *bahala na* therefore, casts it in a negative light.

The deep religiosity of the Filipinos (Fonseca et al., 2005) has led us to acknowledge our role in the overall design of nature in which there is one Supreme Being watching over us. Our faith helps define who we are, and we are empowered by it. This spiritual core of our value system is our *diwa* and it is an internal force that connects us to a higher-order power. This reservoir of strength is what we tap into whenever we utter *bahala na* (Jocano, 1997) as we try to gather the courage to face adversities in life. *Bahala na* can therefore be seen as a personal key that we use to unlock our stored strength when the need arises. Acknowledging that our God has something planned for us, using *bahala na* in a religious sense is even comforting for some, knowing that God's will is done (De Mesa, 1979).

Cognitively, Jocano (1999) goes further and illustrates how saying *bahala na* actually triggers a psychological force that leads to goal achievement. To explain this, he dissects the mental stages that one goes through in assuming a *bahala na* mentality – that uttering it can actually trigger a psychological force that leads one to visualize the desired goal, make decisions that will lead toward the achievement of the said goal, and perform action that will contribute to achieving the goal. In this sense, saying *bahala na* seems to be a go signal for one to assume readiness and confidence to attend to the situation. Lagmay (1993, as cited in Tan, 1997, p. 404) calls this “psychological ascendancy” which connotes activity rather than passivity.

Bahala na can also indicate a deterministic mindset. When one is confronted with a task, a person will tend to assess his limitations and chance of success. Even in situations where uncertainty is high and the risk of failure looms large, he may still opt to go through with the task and put in his best effort, and that little remaining chance for error is given the seal of *bahala na*, a seeming acknowledgement to the role of unforeseen forces impinging in our lives. This sense of determination in the face of uncertainty exemplifies most favorable definitions of *bahala na*, highlighting one's courage to willingly face difficulty and possible failure (Mataragnon, 1979). Likewise, uttering *bahala na* may also mean that the person is willing to accept responsibilities in situations which he cannot control. This is especially

true in ambiguous, unstructured situations where the person has to have a strong sense of *pakiramdam* as well (Mataragnon, as cited in Enriquez, 1993). In this sense, *bahala na* is a helpful tool to the improvising Filipino (Enriquez, 1993; Jocano, 2001).

East Versus West

As mentioned, *bahala na* finds its way in the spiritual core or *diwa* of our *pamantayan* or value system. Our colonial past has given us a contemporary value system that is a mixture of several other nationalities' which have blurred the distinct boundaries of each (Jocano, 1992). Lynch (1979) further notes that the Filipino's value system is not unique in the sense that it is a confluence of the different elements of foreign value systems. This overlap of different value systems has resulted in the Filipino's adoption of values foreign to him. Nonetheless, this adoption does not necessarily mean congruence of the facts; which is why many local researchers have cautioned against attempts to find equivalent western labels to Filipino concepts (e.g., Enriquez, 1993). This apprehension stems out of the fear that the nuances of the concept will be lost as it tried to fit into foreign categories, giving a distorted reflection of Filipino identity and culture. Indeed, some earlier western studies have deduced *bahala na* into static classes which cropped its features and gave it a narrow perspective. Bolstrom (as cited in Enriquez, 1993) for instance, have come to regard *bahala na* as nothing more than fatalism and sees its "escapist value" as the foremost reason why Filipinos relieve tension by resigning themselves to their fate. This incongruence of values from the western and local perspective has resulted in the clashing of these assimilated models with our traditional value orientation. It has also largely contributed to the negativity associated with the concept of *bahala na*.

Finding Strength in *Bahala Na*

In our effort to further understand the meaning of *bahala na*, the researchers decided not to limit themselves to finding its equivalent western concept; instead, we focused our attention on the different dimensions that make it a positive concept - that is, what makes it a strength that would therefore promote positive functioning to its users. Remembering our overall aim which is to identify what is positive with Filipinos and how this could be further promoted, zeroing in on what is positive may engage one to build on strengths, and encourage a more optimistic outlook and consequent

behavior (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Specifically, this paper aims to examine *bahala na* in the context of Positive Psychology's five different strengths: hope, optimism, self-efficacy, courage, and search for the sacred. This approach affirms the belief of the researchers that *bahala na* is multi-faceted and is infused with different themes which makes it a uniquely Filipino concept.

Hope. With the utterance of *bahala na*, one can be said to somehow rely a little part of their effort on forces outside himself, consequently hoping for a positive outcome (Fonseca et al., 2005). *Bahala na* brings with it the belief that "one is not hopeless" (Jocano, 1999, p. 116) and that he can do something to alleviate his situation. Whether *bahala na* is invoked negatively (as a feeble excuse to withdraw from action) or positively (as a trigger to undertake action), one hopes to achieve a favorable result from this exercise. This belief that a positive outcome can be expected is essentially what hope is all about (Stotland, as cited in Orlina, 2007).

An essential part of hope is the goal or the target object. Goals vary in several ways and these can determine its desirability to the one hoping. For one, the goal needs to be valuable to the person for him to fully engage himself into achieving it. One should also distinguish between short- and long-term goals, since each would require a different amount of effort, motivation, time, and even reward. Lastly, determining the level of difficulty in achieving the goal is also important since one has to assess if he is equipped with the necessary resources to achieve it. Snyder's (Snyder & Lopez, 2007) Hope Theory calls this personal assessment of one's capacity as pathways thinking which is a requisite to reach one's goals. Another essential requirement is the motivation to achieve the goal, what he calls agency thinking. One should be careful though to distinguish between the two. Although findings support Snyder's theory that pathways and agency thinking are correlated (Orlina, 2007), having a sense of agency does not guarantee that the person also has a notion of particular pathways to the goal. Hope was found to be correlated with both agency and pathways on separate terms, but not as a unitary unit (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004). In simple terms, this means that a person may be determined to achieve his goals but not necessarily be able to figure out how.

Hope is a secondary emotion meaning it requires the person to analyze and evaluate a situation, leading one researcher to term it as "intellectualized emotion" (Averill, as cited in Orlina, 2007). It is therefore not an automatic and natural behavior. Perhaps in uttering *bahala na*, a person intuitively accesses his resources and starts hoping for positive results while the vision of the goal sustains him throughout the waiting process. Taken further in this light, Jocano (1999) believes that the Filipino hopes when uttering *bahala*

na because he knows he can do something to attain his objective even when the situation is glaringly difficult and unfamiliar. Snyder and Lopez (2007) further explains that a successful hoping, meaning the achievement of set goals, can bring about positive emotions and encourage the person to pursue more goals. This suggests that engaging in *bahala na* situations may even be an adaptive and pragmatic developmental tool that one takes, knowing that incremental experiences of successful hoping can lead to the development of a more hopeful outlook and active participation in one's life.

Optimism. While hope is focused on the achievement of one's specific goals, optimism looks more to the quality of future consequences (Bryant & Cvendros, 2004). Optimists generally have high expectations for the future (Carver & Scheier, 2005). They have a general confidence that their goal is attainable, so much so that they persist even in great difficulty. Seligman's Learned Optimism Theory (as cited in Snyder & Lopez, 2007) further states that optimists and pessimists are distinguished by the way they interpret events that happen to them. When they experience something good such as the successful completion of tasks, optimists attribute the cause of this situation to their own capabilities thereby affirming themselves. A pessimist on the other hand, would attribute the cause to something outside of himself, i.e. "It turned out well because so-and-so helped me." Optimists also think that bad things happen but these are not stable occurrences while pessimists can expect these unfortunate things to happen with regularity. Lastly, an optimist tends to attribute bad outcomes only within the specific context in which it happened while pessimists tend to apply these generally in all situations.

One notable consequence of a *bahala na* engagement that is coupled with an optimistic perspective is with the way optimism influences a person in perceiving his problem and acting on it. Knowing the effects of having a pessimistic attitude which can induce fatalism, an optimist can invoke *bahala na* and find it a helpful tool to handle life situations. Optimism effectively counters the negative interpretation of *bahala na* in most literature since it negates the espoused characteristics of fatalism. Optimists do not like engaging themselves in self-blame and other escapist activities; instead they utilize several tools in dealing with unfortunate situations such as problem-focused coping, positive reframing, and even humor to counter its effect (Carver & Scheier, 2005). The favorable discussions on *bahala na* in local literature support this viewpoint. Jocano (1999) noted that a person who invokes *bahala na* faces the situation confidently knowing that he can solve his problem. It connotes an implicit assumption that there is a way to address the situation. Others further pointed out one's trust in his own capacity to

meet a future event that is bereft of certainty (Fonseca et al., 2005). Another also mentioned that in spite of the traditional Filipino's fatalism, he is essentially optimistic since he eventually expects a positive outcome (De Mesa, 1979). Interestingly, even before Seligman's work on explanatory styles, he already found that the rural Filipinos' attribution of their success to their intelligence and luck seem to enhance their self-esteem (optimistic explanatory style).

Self-efficacy. Having an optimistic outlook in life can enhance one's self-efficacy (Carver & Scheier, 2005). Self-efficacy is one's belief of his capability to accomplish a task. It is a result of their personal cognitive assessment which dictates to a large extent their consequent behavior in a particular situation, hence it is aptly termed as "cognitive mediators of action" (Bandura, 1982, p. 126). Self-efficacy beliefs come about as a result of past experiences that affirmed a person's beliefs in his abilities such as episodes of successful performance, verbal persuasion, and even the realization that his skill is above the rest (Bandura, 1989). An effective assessment of one's capabilities therefore is a result of a combined judgment of personal as well as situational factors. Snyder and Lopez (2007) further affirms the social cognitive nature of self-efficacy by saying that one's belief is determined by environmental factors such as other people's affirmation as stated above. The stronger one's self-efficacy is, the more positive feedback he tends to get from his environment, the higher the goals he sets and the more persistent he will be in his efforts.

The belief in one's capacity to undertake a task takes a prominent role in the concept of *bahala na*. To reiterate Fonseca et al.'s (2005) take on optimism, uttering *bahala na* is coupled with an implicit trust in one's capacity to face the future situation. A person with high self-efficacy would also enhance the first step in *bahala na* which is the visualization process (Jocano, 1999) since it will promote more success scenarios that will guide one's performance. After which, one summons the courage to face the situations and ultimately becomes capable of action (Jocano, 1997). Lastly, Enriquez (1993) believes that a person makes a realistic assessment and comes to accept his inherent limitations with regard to the task at hand. He is careful to note though that this is not passive acceptance but a push for one to make use of his available capacities. On this note, it is important to stress that one can develop a high sense of self-efficacy by courageously exploring new areas of learning since routinary tasks may delude one into a comfortable state and discourage him from exerting additional effort. Highly self-efficacious persons pursue different interests that could potentially lead to a wider number of options, and eventually to a more fruitful and enriching life (Bandura, 1989).

Courage. Most writers never fail to indicate the presence of courage in one who embodies *bahala na* in a constructive manner. Jocano (1997) situates courage in our *diwa* (spiritual core), the deepest level of our value system which contains our collective sentiments. Perhaps he also derived this definition from its Middle English origin *corage* which literally means heart, indicating the centeredness of courage in one's character and persona. Courage, complemented with an increase in self-confidence, can be seen as the end result for someone who decides to engage in *bahala na* (Jocano, 1997). It has also been said to go alongside highly desirable strengths such as valor, gallantry, and daring. Likewise, Lagmay (as cited in Enriquez, 1993) believed that *bahala na* actually highlights courage and determination instead of the passive expectation of the Filipinos.

Peterson and Seligman (as cited in Snyder & Lopez, 2007) described courage as a concept inclusive of universal strengths such as "valor (taking physical, intellectual and emotional stances in the face of danger), authenticity (representing oneself to others and the self in a sincere fashion), enthusiasm/zest (thriving/having a sense of vitality in a challenging situation) and industry/perseverance (undertaking tasks and challenges and finishing them)" (p. 225). Courage does not suggest the absence of fear but the capability to endure in the face of adversity. Haitch (as cited in Snyder & Lopez, 2007) said it best when he described it as two-sided: on one hand, the person may be in fighting form, yet there is also a sense of acceptance of the stubborn realities that the situation presents. Relying even a slim margin of one's fate on something external to one's self indicates strength in the face of unfamiliarity. To be courageous then, indicates a core strength which would dictate how one faces situations, and how he handles these would in the end define him.

Search for the sacred. As mentioned by Fonseca et al. (2005) the Filipinos are a deeply religious lot. Religion plays a major role in their thoughts, beliefs, and way of living. By its mere etymology, *bahala na* originates from *Bathala na*, meaning "*Bathala* will take care" (Jocano, 1981). This overt expression on the reliance on God conveys the Filipinos' acknowledgment of the power that the supernatural has on their thinking, their emotions, their actions, and the totality of their lives (De Mesa, 1979). This is most striking specially when compared to Western thinkers who espouse individualism or mere self-reliance in their endeavors. Most Filipinos on the other hand, acknowledge the role that the Divine Providence plays in any effort, be it individual or collective. For some, acknowledging and even soliciting this divine blessing will increase their chance of success.

This manifested spirituality actually originates from a state of mind. Hill (as cited in Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 260) defines spirituality as "the

feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred.” This is not to say the West does not experience spirituality. Irrespective of specific religious beliefs, Snyder and Lopez (2007) believe that spirituality is universal and that people engage in this search for the sacred because it is foremost a positive state of mind. Having this kind of pervasive state increases one’s chance to experience well-being, while for some, the search for the sacred provides their lives with purpose and meaning. To Filipinos, *bahala na* encapsulates one of the main tenets of Christianity which is to let His will be done (Jocano, 1999; De Mesa, 1979). Clearly, their spirituality provides them with mental rest (Orlina, 2007) and much needed comfort and strength (Fonseca et al., 2005).

The role of socio-economic status

A direct offshoot of an adequate economic standing is the opportunity it provides to enjoy the comforts of life (Engelberg, 2005). Having sufficient financial freedom allows one to complement work with pleasure, pursue their hobbies/ interests, travel, purchase the necessities and even excesses of life (De Mesa, 1979). The satisfaction of these needs raises the probability for one to be happy, be free from anxiety and achieve peace of mind; to sleep every night with the assurance that their and their children’s future looks promising. On the other hand, a person with an acute lack of financial resources may view life differently. Each day may be seen as a struggle to find enough to satisfy his requirements. A lack of a sense of adequate economic standing is also associated with feelings of “stress, negative emotions and even depression” (Engelberg, 2005, p.1). Needless to say, the physical and psychological wellbeing fostered by having financial freedom greatly influences a person’s perception of life itself and even his future scenarios. The influence of one’s economic standing permeates the different dimensions by which *bahala na* is contextualized in this paper. Research has provided sufficient data in illustrating the stark differences between the rich and poor - in their hope, sense of self-efficacy, optimism, courage, and search for the sacred.

Generally, well-off people are more likely to possess higher levels of hope since they have more of the resources to achieve their dreams. This in turn emboldens them, increases the likelihood of achieving it, and makes their goals more attainable. Likewise, wealthy people tend to be more active in effecting changes in their lives and rarely assume a passive role in expecting what the future might bring (De Mesa, 1979). One case in point is Orlina’s (2007) finding that rich people are willing to personally talk to government

officials with regard to our nation's problems. The poor meanwhile responded with apathy and aversion to action because they believed that they were not special enough. Due probably to an enhanced sense of efficacy, the rich use their resources to ensure that future situations will maintain, if not enhance, the status quo. The future looks bright and tomorrow may be full of challenges to improve their fortune. The rich are also found to be able to cope well with difficult situations and are better able to manage their emotional lives (Engelberg, 2005). Wealthier people also tend to prioritize their religion more than the poor people (Porio, Lynch & Hollnsteiner, 1978). They consider teaching trust in God as the foremost value to be taught to their children, as compared to the poor people who preferred to instill the value of obedience to parents as primary to all the values they would like their children to practice. This greater inclination of the rich to believe in God might also be due to the fact that they are thankful for the material wealth they enjoy whereas the poor may have far less blessings to consider.

On the other hand, the poor experience a contrastingly different picture. Children of poor families were found to be more emotionally-affected by the hopelessness in their situation than well-off children (Orlina, 2007). They are exposed to the everyday hardships of the family and are painfully aware of the difficulty of effecting change to achieve their goals. This concurs with other research that point out the correlation of hope with socio-economic status. With regard to Seligman's explanatory styles, Tan (1997) believes that the poor attribute their poverty to something outside of themselves. This is aimed to maintain a happy state of mind because the potentially devastating effect on one's mental and emotional state of admitting one's own inadequacies is avoided. This kind of thinking provides a breeding ground for fatalism, and indeed, one of the more common beliefs of most is that fatalism is the cause of one's poverty. To believe that one's situation is the will of God has several possible effects. For one, it releases one from the guilt and emotional responsibility of failing to provide for one's needs. It may also release one from assuming an active responsibility to change one's situation. Lastly, it may distort the essence of spirituality as the person rationalizes and adopts a "do-nothing or do-little economic philosophy with bad theology" (De Mesa, 1979, *p.* 91). In a sense, the poor's adoption of a fatalistic outlook is an adaptive effort, a mental adjustment to his poverty that permits him to be happy in spite of his situation. However, they usually come to accept their situation without much bitterness, but this calm demeanor does not mean a passive acceptance to the way things are but is again suggestive instead of their adaptive ability.

In this light, this research attempted to compare how present-day Filipinos, differentiated by social class, contextualize the use of *bahala na*. Furthermore, the researchers seek to find possible agreements, overlaps or contradictions on how the two distinct classes perceive themselves when engaging in the *bahala na* phenomenon.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This research assessed the context by which Filipinos of today use the term *bahala na*. Furthermore, a comparison was made on the data obtained from two groups distinctly different according to their socio-economic status. Specifically, this research sought to know:

- (1) What do Filipinos mean when they say *bahala na*?
- (2) In what situations is the term *bahala na* often used?
- (3) What is the perceived effect of saying *bahala na* on one's feelings and actions?
- (4) Are the concepts of hope, optimism, self-efficacy, courage and search for the sacred reflected in the context of *bahala na*?
- (5) Is there a difference in the context in which *bahala na* is used according to socio-economic status?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study is an empirical exploration of the present day Filipino's concept of *bahala na*. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs).

Participants

Previous research showed that there are differences among people with varying socio-economic status in their concept of hope, self-efficacy, optimism, courage, and search for the sacred. Thus, participants of the study were purposively selected from two communities with varying socio-economic status. The first group included residents of a middle class subdivision – FERN Village in Quezon City, while the second group is composed of settlers in an urban poor community located in Pael Estate, UP Diliman, Quezon City.

There were 6 female and 5 male participants from FERN Village. The mean age of the group is 43 years old. Four of the participants were able to

attain post-graduate education. There were likewise four of them who finished college while three are college undergraduates (2 of the 3 are currently finishing their degree). The average monthly household income of all the participants is PhP40,001.00 and above. This is much higher than the average monthly household income of families living in the National Capital Region (PhP18,418.00) based on the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (National Statistics Office, 2006).

The participants in the Pael Estate Group are 8 female and 5 male residents. Most of the participants are high school graduates while only two of them were able to spend a few years in college. Only three of the participants reported an average household monthly income of PhP10,001.00 to PhP15,000.00 per month. Most of their families earn an average of PhP5,000.00 to PhP10,000.00 per month which is much lower than the average monthly household income of families living in the National Capital Region (NSO, 2006).

The participants from Fern Village will be referred to as the middle-income group in the succeeding parts of this paper while the participants from Pael Estate will be referred to as the low-income group.

Recruitment of participants. The participants in the middle-income group are neighbors of one of the researchers. Majority of the households in the Village were given invitations to participate in the study. Follow-up calls for attendance and attendance confirmation were made to identify participants and to ensure their attendance. The participants were told that there will be a discussion on *Bahala Na* for a study being conducted by the neighbor-researcher. On the other hand, the participants in the lower-income group were relatives and neighbors/friends of relatives of one of the researchers. The participants were identified and verbally invited by the researcher's cousin and aunt two weeks before the FGD. The participants were told that "*Pinag-aaralan nila ang tungkol sa Bahala Na kaya makikipagkwentuhan sila sa atin*" (They are studying *Bahala Na* and would like to talk to us).

Gathering demographic information. Demographic information regarding the participants' gender, age, educational attainment, and average household monthly income were gathered using a personal data sheet. Income ranges were developed based on the 2006 Family Income and Expenditure Survey.

Conducting the FGD. A three-hour focus group discussion for each of the two groups was conducted to gather responses to the following:

1. *Ano ang ibig ninyong sabihin kapag sinabi ninyo ang salitang "bahala na"?*
(What do you mean when you utter the words, *bahala na*?)

2. *Ano ang mga sitwasyon kung saan sinasabi ninyo ito? Ano ang mga nauna nyo pang aksyon na pantugon sa sitwasyon bago nyo sabihin ito?*
(In what situations do you say *bahala na*? What do you usually do to address the situation at hand, even before you utter these words?)
3. *Kapag sinabi ninyong bahala na, ano ang epekto /impluwensya nito sa susunod ninyong gagawin? Sa inyong pakiramdam?*
(In what ways do you think does saying *bahala na* influence your succeeding actions and feelings?)

For the first question, the participants were asked to individually write their answers on a piece of paper to lessen the influence of others on their own personal meaning of *bahala na*. These were then presented and discussed in plenary. After which, the rest of the questions were presented by the facilitator one at a time and discussed by the group in plenary. Apart from getting their insights, the discussions served to clarify the participants' answers. A summary of the participants' responses was presented by the researcher after discussing each question.

Ethical Considerations. Two ethical considerations were emphasized by Flick (2007) in conducting focus group discussions and which were observed in this research. First is the "vulnerability of the participants" (p.112) which requires consideration of the impact on the person's life context as he/she participates in the discussion. The topic of the study and the research design does not require participants who may be characterized as "vulnerable" (e.g. children, patients, survivors) to any possible adverse impact of participating in the FGD. However, the researchers opted to conduct separate FGDs for groups with varying socio-economic status to avoid participants' comparison of life challenges and highlighting the existing differences in life situations.

Another ethical point concerns the dynamics of the group which pertains mainly to the possibility of having one or two participants dominating the entire discussion. To address the possibility of having participants who may dominate the discussion, the researchers ensured that they effectively performed the moderator role in gathering the participants' insights while refereeing the discussion so that each participant was given time to share his/her response to the question (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Other means were employed to facilitate the smooth flow of discussions such as asking the participants to individually write their responses, as well as delegating the partner-researcher as documenter and publisher of responses.

Data Analysis

The responses for all the questions were examined using thematic analysis to establish each group's concept of *bahala na* and its perceived impact on their future actions and emotions. The labels constructed by the researcher and participants during the FGD were used as themes. These were later used in conducting a between-group comparison of the FGDs results.

RESULTS

Previous debates on *bahala na* centered on whether this is indicative of a negative or positive Filipino value. The results of the discussions demonstrate that Filipinos view *bahala na* as positive, negative or neutral depending on the context or situation in which it was expressed or used and in the amount of effort one has exerted before saying it.

What Do We Mean When We Say *Bahala Na*?

The responses from the two groups were classified according to whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. A positive response means that *bahala na* is indeed used as a strength wherein it is viewed as instrumental for the person to achieve his/ her stated goals. A negative response shows *bahala na* as being equated with a deliberate lack of action while a neutral response reflects the person's uncertainty in his succeeding steps.

Most of the respondents from both groups mentioned that saying *bahala na* in a negative way may mean that the person lacks a defined direction on how to proceed with a task or with life in general. It means that the person is "*Walang direksyon sa buhay*" (Has no direction in life) or "*Walang pananaw sa buhay*" (Has no outlook in life). It may also mean that the individual was not able to plan on what to do ("*walang plano*" or resorting to "*reckless risk*" as described by one of the participants). Not being able to plan can be due to laziness or fear of planning. For some, it may also mean that the individual relies on chance or lacks accountability and commitment ("*Tsamba-tsamba lang*").

Bahala na assumes a neutral meaning when it is used as a way of expressing one's state of not knowing what to do or what to choose. Words and phrases used by the participants to describe this state includes *naninigurado* (trying to make certain), *okay lang kahit ano* (would agree

with anything), *hindi sigurado* (not sure), *nagdadalawang isip* (having second thoughts), *wala nang ibang choices* (has no other choices), *di ko alam kung ano ang mangyayari* (does not know what will happen), *hindi alam ang kalalabasan* (not knowing the outcome). This is due to either not having enough information or not having choices in life; with the former being more characteristic of participants coming from the middle-income group while the latter describing the lower income group. In such situations, the *bahala na* attitude becomes neither positive nor negative.

For the middle-income group, *bahala na* takes a positive stand when it seems to provide an impetus to engage in work. For them, it means taking calculated risks and believing in one's capabilities to get things done. This may mean being bold in making decisions when pushed to do so because of the knowledge that one can manage the possible consequences. As one of the participants in this group said "*Sige go! Bahala na! May kaunting hesitation pa din pero kaya mo yung consequences*" (Go on! Bahala na! There is still some hesitation but you can handle the consequences). It may also be positive if it means doing the required action even in the face of danger. Likewise, it is healthy for the person to express *bahala na* if the goal is to seek comfort or temporary relief. On the other hand, the low-income group's positive view of *bahala na* revolves mainly on the comfort it gives them in the face of uncertainty. As participants from the lower-income group shared, "*Bahala na ang bukas kung ano ang mangyayari... kalmante lang sa problema*" (*Bahala na* on what will happen tomorrow, stay calm even if you have problems).

Depending on the context in which it was used, *bahala na* that leaves one's fate to the divine (e.g., "*I leave my fate to the Lord*") may be positive or negative. This may be viewed as positive if one accepts the role of the divine in defining one's fate or in accepting that there are things beyond our control. On the other hand, it may be negative if the person did not do his/her best or exerted enough effort in a task and just bequeath the outcomes to a Supreme Being. Interestingly, only the middle-income group made mention of their submission to God's will which is noticeably absent from the low-income group. Table 1 shows the summary of responses on the participants' concept of *bahala na*.

TABLE 1
The Concept of *Bahala Na*

Nature of concept	Groups	
	Middle Income Group	Low Income Group
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Leaving one's fate to the Lord · Belief in one's capabilities · Doing the action despite the threat · Escape to seek comfort/temporary relief · Calculated risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Calmness in the face of uncertainty
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not sure of what to choose/ what to do · Delay the decision making · Delay the commitment because of lack of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not sure of what to do · Lack of choices sometimes due to having a hard life
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Laziness/ fear to plan · Leaving the future to chance/God · Lack of direction · Lack of accountability/commitment · Reckless risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of direction · Laziness to plan

When Do We Say *Bahala Na*?

The responses to this question show a perceptible contrast in the outlook of the two groups. As seen in Table 2, the more financially-comfortable participants mentioned that they only express *bahala na* in situations where they know that outcomes are manageable. In most instances, they have done their best and exerted enough effort "*ginawa na lahat ng makakaya... you have done your best, lahat ng capability mo*" (you have done everything within your capability) and leave it up to the divine as a form of acceptance that one cannot control everything or to "surrender a little portion to God so that he can put in his plan." The participants from the same group also uttered *bahala na* in particular situations where there is uncertainty, lack of information, or lack of choices. As one of the participants shared, "*Sometimes you have to do a lot of things in a short span of time, example in a day. You don't know what to prioritize because everything is priority.... You adapt depending on where you are and what information you have, bahala na.*" However, they may also say it when there is an abundance of choices "*when there are too many options for you, when you say okay na, kahit ano, (anything will do) bahala na.*" In such instances, they

choose to take the risk and face the situation. “*Yung situation na uncertain, out of control, example office work... too complicated, pressed for time and you’re not yet satisfied with the outcome (you’ll say) okay na, bahala na... you want to get out of the complicated situation at i-confront directly.*” In these instances the participants still chose to perform the task and “begin their journey,” face realities or look for solutions.

TABLE 2
Situations where the Respondents Use or Express *Bahala Na*

Groups	
Middle Income Group	Low Income Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situations that are uncertain or not within my control • Lack of information • In complex situations, it serves as a decision-making tool • When taking calculated risks • When asked to make quick decisions/ under pressure to deliver • Lack of time to do the things that one needs to do • When choosing between equally advantageous or disadvantageous options • Holding-off decisions while waiting for more options • Beginning of a journey • In going to a dangerous place and you still go despite potential dangers because you need to • Not used in situations where actions may have grave consequences, but only in situations with manageable outcomes • When you’ve done everything that you can and you leave the rest to God • When you make a comprehensive plan on what to do but you surrender a little portion to God so that he can put in his plan • Only used by people with “lakas ng loob”/ able to take risks; not by people “na mahina ang loob” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty, not having money to buy the things needed to pay the bills or to care for the sick • One wants to do something that he/ she cannot do • Failed relationships • When faced with problems where there seems to be no solution • Not sure of the future/of what will happen but chooses to face it

For the same group, saying *bahala na* is “only used by people who are able to take risks” (“*may lakas ng loob*”). Those who are not capable of taking risks may be weak and unwilling to express it. Two of the participants emphasized these points, “*Kung mahina ang loob mo hindi kaya ang bahala na, pero kung malakas ang loob, bahala na sige!*” (If you are not strong, you cannot handle *bahala na*, but if you are strong, *bahala na*, go!) and “*May not be applicable kapag mahina ang loob. Applicable to people who are risk-takers, positive always kaya they can handle whatever outcome... they're not afraid of the outcome*” (Not applicable if you are weak. Applicable to people who are risk-takers, they are always positive that’s why they can handle whatever outcome... they’re not afraid of the outcome).

On the other hand, the participants from the low-income group seem to reflect a more resigned outlook as they utter *bahala na* in situations where they perceive themselves as having limited capabilities such as competence in leadership or ability to protect one’s self in a dangerous situation. As one participant mentioned, “*Pag meron kang gustong gawin na di mo magawa*” (When there is something you want to do but can’t). *Bahala na* also figures in situations where there is a felt need in resources such as time and money, to quote, “*Yung sweldo ko kulang, walang pambayad sa mga ibang bagay. Di sigurado kung saan kukuha ng pambayad, bahala na*” (My salary is not enough, I don’t have enough to pay for some things. Not sure where to get money, *bahala na*). Further, it is only in this group that *bahala na* has also been taken in the context of relationships – “*Kapag bawal na pag-ibig. Maraming kontra, Bahala na*” (If it is a forbidden love, and a lot of people are against it, *bahala na*).

How Does Expressing *Bahala Na* Affect a Person’s Emotions?

Table 3 summarizes the various emotions felt by the participants in situations where they express *bahala na*.

Different emotions were displayed by the participants of both groups in the shared instances where they expressed *bahala na*. Interestingly, positive feelings such as *comfort, relief, acceptance, being at peace, confidence, and empowerment* were felt by participants who are more well-to-do in life. However, the emotions become adverse in situations where they know for a fact that there is uncertainty or they lacked effort or planning. These unpleasant emotions include *restlessness* and *being nervous*. A participant in the middle-income group shared that he feels “*relieved that (he) is able to make a decision... nervous if (he) lacks effort and confident if (he) gave it a lot of effort.*”

TABLE 3
Effects of *Bahala Na* on Emotions

Groups	
Middle Income Group	Low Income Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Comfort · Temporary belief · Restlessness/ bothered due to uncertainty or lack of planning · Relieved because you have made a decision · Acceptance that God has a plan · Peace (when you surrender it to the Lord) · Nervous if you lack effort/uncertain · Confident if you gave a lot of effort · Empowered because you know that you can do it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sadness due to lack of a definite direction or due to the realization of extreme poverty · Irritated/ angry when you cannot do what you want

On the other hand, negative feelings such as irritation, anger, and sadness, were largely expressed by participants in the lower-income bracket. These feelings come from a realization of one's state in life that includes extreme poverty and inability to act as desired due to not having any options. Two of the participants from the lower-income group described their feelings as "*Malungkot, dahil sa sobrang kahirapan bahala na kung saan kukuha ng pangangailangan*" (Sad because of extreme poverty, not knowing where to get our needs, *bahala na*) and "*Nabubuwisit, kapag alanganin ka na at nagagalit kasi yung gusto mong manyari di mo magawa*" (Irritated because I am unsure and angry because you cannot do anything to make things happen the way you want it). Although one participant expressed optimism even in the face of uncertainty (*Nakawala ng problema... Wala ng pangamba*), this pales in comparison to the overall sentiment of the group.

How Does Expressing Bahala Na Affect One's Actions?

Generally, participants from both the middle and lower-income groups are fueled to act on the situation after expressing *bahala na*. The succeeding actions include delivering the desired outcomes and finding ways to get out of the unfavorable situation. A participant from the middle-income group expressed that "*It's the beginning of my journey, (because) it gives me*

positive pressure to do my best.” While participants in the lower-income group mentioned that “*Kailangan umaksyon*” (I need to take action) and “*Kailangang kumilos, ang aksyon ay depende sa problema. [Halimbawa] kung may bisita ka, bahala na kung anong ipapakain, pag wala, maghahanap ako ng paraan*” (I need to act, the action will depend on the problem. [For example,] I have a visitor and I do not have food to offer, I will find a way). There may also be tendencies for inaction especially in instances where one thinks that he/she can depend on other people or someone will come to their rescue. As expressed by a participant from the lower-income group “*Pag may inaasahan ka, dun tinatamad. Pag wala kang inaasahan, dun ka kikilos*” (If you can rely on someone else, you will be lazy. If you cannot depend on anyone, you will take action). Others may choose to have a “wait and see” attitude while in situations that are deemed desperate, one may choose to temporarily escape - “*kikilos nalang.... upang bumili ng pang-inom*” (I will do something... I will buy something to drink).

TABLE 4
Effects of *Bahala Na* on Actions

Groups	
Middle Income Group	Low Income Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Readiness to do what you have to do · Positive pressure to do my best based on the required outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Need to act (<i>Kailangang umaksyon</i>) · <i>Need to find a way</i> · May act lazily/ not act at all if one knows that he/she can depend on someone · Wait and see attitude · Will not act if in a desperate situation

The above findings show that while *bahala na* retains some of its more popular negative aspects, the predominant view suggests a rational assessment of one’s resources and context that generally leads to actions geared towards addressing one’s needs or attaining one’s goals. It was also discovered that a person’s socio-economic status influences the context where *bahala na* is said and how this affects emotions.

DISCUSSION

Some of the themes that emerged from the FGDs were consistent with the three perspectives that reflect the origins of *bahala na*. Although a few of the responses may be within the context of fatalism (e.g., God can put in his plan), the most prevalent is the tendency to engage in proactive, risk-taking behaviors with a belief that there is a Supreme Being that will take care of things that are beyond their control.

According to the participants, expressing *bahala na* due to laziness or lack of planning and accountability reflects a "reckless risk-taking" behavior that shows the Filipino's tendency to avoid responsibility. This concept of *bahala na* which has the quintessential *Juan Tamad* as an exemplar reflects the perspective that made it an infamous Filipino value. Although this seemed to be the more popular notion, the results showed that this concept of *bahala na* was rarely used in their life experiences. Participants generally demonstrate the value of *bahala na* in situations where there is uncertainty and in which they opted to take "calculated risks." In instances where there is lack of information or resources to make sure-fire decisions, the participants plunged themselves into action with the knowledge that consequences are manageable.

It was evident in the discussions that the Filipino value of *bahala na* can be negative, positive, or neutral depending on the situation and the antecedent behavior. The participants however were generally in agreement that in most instances, they have done their best and exerted enough effort before resorting to *bahala na*. This is not to resign themselves to fate as how the West generally perceives it (e.g., Bolstrom, as cited in Enriquez, 1993), but in accepting that there may be things that one cannot control. It was clear in the discussions that although *bahala na* gives a feeling of calmness, comfort, or relief to Filipinos, it is not an excuse for failing to find ways to achieve the desired outcome. It is more of an acknowledgment that there are forces greater than or beyond the individual. Consistent with the claims made by Jocano (1999), Filipinos tap their inner strength as they gather courage in the face of adversity. Similarly, most of the participants claim that the expression of *bahala na* pushes them to act on the situation. Being able to say *bahala na* especially in instances that require a decision or action allow the participants to move beyond the decision-making phase of how to act or what courses of action to take. *Bahala na* empowers the person to proceed with the action.

Courage and *Bahala Na*

The participants' tendency to use *bahala na* in choosing to face uncertain situations demonstrates some universal strengths that define the concept of courage. One participant claimed that he expresses *bahala na* in going to potentially "dangerous places" where it is important for him to go. Going by Peterson & Seligman's (as cited in Snyder & Lopez, 2007) definition, this can be seen as a simple manifestation of valor because it shows courage regardless of the physical and mental pain it may inflict. Likewise, taking "calculated risks" may be viewed as an expression of enthusiasm and zest, while making "quick decisions... under pressure to deliver" indicates industry and perseverance. The presence of courage is unarguably evident since most of the participants claimed that even with the prospect of an unfamiliar and potentially difficult situation, invoking *bahala na* fuels them to act to find ways to get out of the unfavorable situation and deliver the desired outcomes.

Optimism, Self-Efficacy, Hope and *Bahala Na*

Optimism was not clearly self-evident in the different responses obtained from the participants. Rather, it was implicitly and vaguely said thru the mention of "reliance of fate in the Divine" with the Divine being a catch-all phrase for the Provider of good things. It is interesting to note that for most of the respondents, a shrewd calculation of events was exhibited before invoking *bahala na*. This is most evident in their "wait and see" attitude or their "preference for manageable outcomes only." These reflect the cautiousness of the respondents, wary in surrendering control of their decision to unfamiliar scenarios. Unfortunately, all these responses are left open to interpretation yet does not firmly indicate a positive expectation for their efforts.

Closely linked to this is the concept of Hope. Hope, in the context of Snyder's Pathways and Agency thinking, has been sufficiently mentioned by both social classes. The poor have stated their "need to find a way" which seems to say that they are fully aware of their situation but lack the routes to achieve their goals, albeit due to the barriers posed by their lack of resources. As for the agency thinking, a couple of responses have been reflective of hope such as the readiness to tackle situations and the confidence to pursue their goals.

Self-efficacy beliefs were evident in the rich respondents while not a single response was obtained from the poor. This concurs with the earlier findings of De Mesa (1979) that the rich tend to be more active in effecting

changes to their environment. Their economic standing may have given them an inner confidence to handle difficult situations, and to express themselves quite comfortably.

Search for the Sacred and *Bahala Na*

As predicted, the participants mentioned responses that alluded to the divine. Whether reiterating the predetermination of lives or placing their hopes in the future, the association of *bahala na* in the context of religion is unmistakable. Both rich and poor alike invoked the power of the Supreme Being, perhaps assuring them that God will work his hands to not let them down. However, the rich alluded to the divine in more instances than the poor. This result concurs with findings that the rich are found to prioritize religion more as compared to the poor (Porio et al., 1978; Tan, 1997).

Limitations of the Research

The variability of the context by which *bahala na* is used contributes to its conflicting definitions. Flippantly invoking *bahala na* as an excuse for one's inaction undermines what it truly represents and may even indicate a weak connection between what is said and what is done. The method used here limits the research in terms of assessing the veracity of the participants' self-reports and their long-term consequent behaviors. What is espoused may not necessarily be actualized. Further, possible individual efforts may be in play such as the participants' desire to maintain an acceptable image in front of others which may have limited them from sharing some personal negative qualities (i.e., laziness, inaction) that figure in the context of *bahala na*.

Implications for Future Research

The variability in the understanding of *bahala na* seems to open other avenues for study. For one, determining the coping activities and mechanisms of economically challenged Filipinos in their effort to maintain hope, belief in themselves and the Divine seem to be a logical offshoot. Future research can also validate courage and optimism as core strengths of the Filipinos that perhaps sustain them even in difficult situations. Further, the small number of participants in this study is hardly indicative of the general Filipino sentiment. This research aims to initiate other, more extensive efforts to effectively capture the changing Filipino views.

As encouraged by some Filipino sociologists and psychologists, it takes an understanding of the Filipino's historical and cultural context to fully understand *bahala na*. It is a multi-faceted concept relative to our knowledge of Western values. This research has initiated a way of studying it in the context of Positive Psychology – to determine what it is and how we can harness it to promote positive functioning of the Filipinos.

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