



Height Matters: The Making, Meanings, and Materialities of Human Stature in the Philippines

P.G. Lasco

Height matters: The making, meanings, and materialities of human stature in the Philippines

Gideon Lasco

SUMMARY

My research project looks at the making, the meanings and materialities of height in the Philippines, using a cultural history of height in the country and an ethnography among young people in the tourist city of Puerto Princesa in Palawan Island, Western Philippines. By “materialities”, I refer to situations where height matters—from basketball games that privilege tall bodies to nutrition programs where children’s heights are measured. While the existence of a ‘height premium’ has been proposed by psychologists and economic historians, I argue that the value of height can be best understood and properly contextualized by looking at how it figures in the everyday lives of people. While height is a biological and physical property, I argue it is also always social—and therefore *relational*—in its making, meanings, and measurings.

In my first chapter, “**Little Brown Brothers**”, I present an “episodic history” of the American colonial period (1898-1946) to show how scientific racism, biomedicine, public health, sports, and a nascent bureaucracy intersected in the making of height as an important attribute of individuals and populations. In relation to the “tall” Americans, Filipinos were depicted as “short”, and the attention to children’s growth, the rise of sports, and the establishment of a bureaucracy all contributed to making height a measure of health and as a parameter of inclusion (and exclusion) in various domains of society.

In my second chapter, “**The Making of Height**”, I present the different ways of “height-making”, that is, the different practices that are done to make children grow taller. Breastfeeding, nutrition, circumcision, and the use of growth supplements emerge as common practices. I pay special attention to the latter, given its recent emergence and amenability to further analysis as a product that has a ‘social life’.

In my third chapter “**Stature and Schooling**”, inspired by Bourdieu’s reminder of the importance of pedagogy in social reproduction, I illustrate how the meanings of height are “learned” in schools and consequently embodied by children as habitus. In conceptualising the school as a ‘field’, I demonstrate how height is a form of capital, appropriated not just by the young people but the schools themselves—without them necessarily reflecting on the role of height and its ramifications.

In my and fourth and final chapter, “**Height and Employment**”, I show the pervasiveness of height requirements—both explicit and implicit—in various jobs and employment opportunities, and how young people confront and negotiate these requirements. These forms of institutionalisations structure young people’s aspirations and further reinforce the convertibility of height as an ‘economic capital’.

In my conclusion, I bring together some of the themes that I have raised in the chapters, and reflect on what these themes can offer in terms of explaining the meanings and materialities of height in the lives of young people, and more theoretically, the role of the body in society. I end by reflecting on the ways in which the vertical dimension has structured human experience and sketching how it can offer new insights for anthropology.