

# Arenas of Brinkmanship: A Culture of *Pa-simplihan*

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“There was a young lady from Niger  
who smiled as she rode on the tiger.  
They returned from the ride with the lady  
inside and the smile on the face of the tiger.”

To my consternation, I discovered that a second year student of pre-dentistry enrolled in my class had downloaded *in toto* and submitted, as her own, an essay done by another student of our school batches before her. The original essay was posted by the writer in a blog site, multiply.com, back in 2008. Another student of mine also downloaded, though only portions, from the same 2008 essay (though this leaves me wondering if she had lifted from somewhere else the rest of her essay). Can there be some kind of a culture of cheating, of pushing our luck to the brink in different fields, contexts, and conditions? Two seemingly different contexts have come to be among the usual arenas of this brinkmanship: the school and the streets.

Brinkmanship is defined in Reader’s Digest Dictionary as the “pursuit of dangerous policy to the limits of safety before

indeed seen people risk life and limbs and appear to pull stunts to get through and get on with their business. This is especially true in the dynamic streets of Metro Manila. And how often too have we observed in and among us counter-productive habits like cheating and procrastination in public and private lives that ultimately lead to serious consequences.

*Everything about the way of life, learned and shared behavior, whether systematized and imposed by ideological state apparatuses (Althusser) or supreme entities, or ultimately written in our genes developed and enforced through stages of learning, is what anthropology is all about.*

That we are a nation of stuntmen (stunt-people?) keeps popping up in my mind like a verbal validation whenever I see the people crossing highways and other busy roads, in complete contempt of discursive warning signs “*Bawal tumawid. May namatay na rito.* (No crossing. People have been killed here trying.)” And a footbridge is not even three meters away. Ironically, one would even see traffic aides and policemen cross the highways in the same daring way, with nary a disability or burden to excuse them from crossing on the very streets they are supposed to keep safe.

Many a time, some of us might just be thinking “If we can sneak it in, we will sneak it in.” (“*Kung makakalusot, lulusot.*”) My discussion will be using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice particularly his concept *habitus*, and Clifford Geertz’s Interpretive Anthropology. I will also discuss how we have become so “technologized,” as Henrietta Moore put it in her 1996 essay “The Future of Anthropology,” to provide a context into how the sneaking in happen in schoolwork.

Developments in anthropology has freed up and widened the manner of discourse in the study of culture, knowledge and knowledge acquisition, adaptations and evolutions, rationality and alterity. Everything about the way of life, learned and shared behavior, whether systematized and imposed by ideological state apparatuses (Althusser) or supreme entities, or ultimately written in our genes developed and enforced through stages of learning, is what anthropology is all about. Edward Tylor’s definition of culture, which he equates with civilization, “taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art,

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Almost like a truism, Clifford Geertz quotes Ward Goodenough saying “culture is (located) in the hearts and minds of men (Moore: 238).” He also concurs with Max Weber, “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Moore:236).”

It is important to assess and come to grips with this way of living—culture—and way of thinking—rationality. Skirting sensible and morally correct rules to the point of courting death makes the streets of Manila among the most exciting—if not the most dangerous—urban areas in the world. A German guest once told the one driving for him, “If you drive this way in Germany, you would get caught. But if I drive here the way I do in Germany, I would get killed.”

Traffic rules and even traffic lights are taken by many motorists and pedestrians alike to be mere suggestions. The traffic light between SM Manila and City Hall is among the most ignored equipment even by the traffic enforcers themselves, who at times give different signals to people. Similarly, though less obviously absent-mindedly, the rules in acknowledging sources and paraphrasing borrowed ideas in formal reports can sometimes be overlooked, misconstrued, or completely disregarded (sometimes with impunity) by students, like this student of mine who plagiarized a whole essay. Maybe the rules of citation would be a bit too complicated for some of them, but to completely miss out on the core and essence of the exercise of having a personal engagement with a material, like a literary piece, and of writing out one’s own process and product of that engagement would really be, at the very least, flabbergasting and disappointing for the teacher.

In the academe, as anywhere else, cheating is a real concern because, if I may quote Dr. Moore (albeit a bit out of context), “we teach, because education is part of

governmentality. It is one of the major ways in which individuals come to align themselves with moral, ethical, economic, and political objectives, and because we teach, we all have a hand in this process, wherever we work and whatever we actually teach.” This issue of cheating—as well as cheating death—would be the topic of a research paper set right where I find myself.

The phenomenon of brinkmanship—which really courts danger—within the busy streets of Metro Manila has been observed to have its system of re-appropriated codes. I have observed and interviewed people on the streets who provided the terms and meanings of their street culture. The perspective therefore is decidedly emic because I am also in this mode of living at times. Moreover, the explanations for the expressions and behavior are coming from these people themselves who have been doing greater risk-taking on a regular basis, that is, as a way of life.

Geertz’s ethnography, which he terms “thick description,” provides an approach to studying phenomena which allows “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render (1973).”

Observing and negotiating day-to-day the dynamic Metro Manila traffic, as well as speaking with students who plagiarize portions of, if not an entire paper, I can and will produce entire ethnography overlaid with structures of significations provided by the particular informants and most likely entangled with the principles that are supposed to play out as rules and regulations in those contexts. This particular ethnographic approach has precisely been how I did my master’s thesis on the aesthetics of the Black Nazarene devotion in Quiapo, making the devotees themselves provide the meanings and their meaning-making as they performed their faith, like actors annotating their performance. In fact, initially I drafted a paper on risk-taking in the streets of Quiapo and San Sebastian, where digital video pirates and petty criminals ply their trade. But

somehow, this incident with the plagiarizing student (there were actually two I caught, but who knows how many more) made me work on this more pressing concern for us in the teaching profession and for the whole learning process of the young people not just here in UP. (I am following through our class discussion on the fake credentials sold along a street that has been named for one of the most respected statesmen in Philippine history.)

For sure the technologized environment has afforded cheating students a better way of skirting the rules (in the same way the video pirates had), but the same environment also provides the search engine to detect copied texts, for whatever reason. But is there something inside the cognitive faculties of people who cheat that missed out on the process of learning, of what education is really all about, of the joy of eureka moments? Is this plagiarism merely a coping mechanism, a tool of adaptation to environment? Or is plagiarism, per se, a resistance to a structural functionalist paradigm of education? For sure, the video pirates subvert the rules on copyright and trading of counterfeit items. Do these persisting transgressions imply the erosion of the relevance of structures as rule-makers? Do not incidents like this all the more extol the supremacy of the agency over the structure? Or has the human agent been produced, formed, or determined by some other structure? Does this manner of behavior by human agents “re-structure the structuring structures,” as Bourdieu put it, creating and calcifying this culture of cheating? What explanations for their actions do these agents give as their intention or excuse or meaning? Have they labels for what they do? Have these labels been appropriated from some other system of texts?

Poststructuralists have attempted to analyze this departure—even resistance—of individual human agents from the grand order of things by. If I may quote a few lines from Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1995), he refers to “the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment . . . produce *habitus*, systems of durable transposable dispositions, structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation

and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them, and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor." In same way that the human agent can allow himself or herself to follow rules within social systems, engage in trade, go through stages of a system of education, and accommodate him/herself into the larger structure, this same agent can start to go against the rules and develop contrary predispositions for a variety of reasons. If this person could influence more human agents to that mode of living, which is a counter-cultural set of *habitus* or structure, these individual human agents by sheer number would ultimately re-structure the very structure that had initially structured them, if it is not founded on deep and fast set of goals and values, or, as Bourdieu put it, the "principles of the generation of structuring practices." Should this happen, the changed behavior of the majority could become the norm, the convention or, in Filipino, "*kalakaran*."

Malcolm Crick reminds us that "The subject matter of social studies are persons who use language, construct meanings, follow rules, give accounts of their actions—beings, in short, who have considerable insights into their own nature (Moore, 281)." Tim Ingold dissects this ultimate subject of anthropology, an organism called the human person, noting that personhood is not in the genes, per se, nor in the physiological development worked on (fed, protected, clothed, trained) by the awaiting environment. A "person," Ingold writes, "denotes first the generic class consisting of alternative cultural formations of a universal, and secondly, the corollary of one such formation which posits the 'self' as an unconstructed centre of awareness awaiting formation in terms of socially received categories (Moore, 186)."

## ALONG THE STREETS OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

All over main roads are warning signs that read “*Bawal tumawid. May namatay na rito.*” These are even a revision of these signs just up until last year “*Bawal tumawid. Nakamamatay.* (No crossing. It might kill.),” because I have indeed seen two or three persons sprawled dead in places like EDSA and Quezon Avenue. Still, however, our busy pedestrians and the ambulant street vendors could not seem to care less about those signs, and even about the motorists already so exasperated with u-turn slots and bad roads.

For observers, their goals for risking lives and limbs might seem petty, like when cigarette boys swing on to the running board of a jeepney or chase after cars just to be able to sell one stick of cigarette or a piece of candy. A tiny tricycle would be carrying ten children, five packed inside, two hanging on the back of the tiny cabin, two half-seated behind the driver, and one more embracing the cab in front, clinging for dear life. Invariably, the reason people do these because they were scrimping on resources (time, money, good relations or social capital, to borrow Bourdieu’s term). But ultimately, it might really point to an ultimate disregard for the law (even the laws of physics) because it would simply cause too much trouble to do things the right way.

A group of four (a man, a woman, a child between them, and another in front of the one driving, all without helmets) can be seen balancing themselves on a speeding motorbike, wending in and out of car lanes. Inside a car is a guy texting while trying to beat the red light. Just at the foot of the pedestrian overpass at the intersection of Quezon Avenue and EDSA, enterprising barkers even cut through the chicken wire fence to spare people getting off the footbridge from the long walk to the designated jeepney terminal; they would flap chicken wire open and have the loading station right at the

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curb where long passenger jeepneys park awkwardly and block the service road.

If one looks at these phenomena from the political economy theory it would appear that the will of the imposing authority is subverted by the individual human agents. But maybe those individuals are not even aware of that, especially if they have grown up in the streets learning from their parents who have a simple take on the uniformed authorities: that they are the “*kalaban*” or “enemies,” who deprive them of their livelihood (or get a big cut from it), who chase them away. For the many people who actually sleep along the sidewalks at night after a day of barking for jeepney passengers or peddling cigarettes, car accessories, *sampaguita* garlands and what-not, in their waking hours, it appears that their only concern is their survival, their adaptation to the proverbial concrete jungle in the mode of “survival of the fittest,” as Spencer put it. Now, taking this angle from Tim Ingold’s view, the relational becoming of the persons-on-the streets depend on how they have indeed been reared, oriented, and can find satisfaction in their own context.

Terms like *diskarte*, *dilihensiya*, *pasimplihan*, *i-safety*, and “style” acquire nuances of meanings that pertain to our precarious life on the streets, that of skirting danger and of overcoming limitations, that of almost always living on the edge, where the adrenalin rush is as much a reward as reaching the goal.

In Geertz’s Interpretive anthropology, the gestures as well as the re-appropriated words have become the convention of discourse within the context of street life, as well as provide the pictorial and verbal elements in the “thick description” of coming from the narratives and explanations of these people.

***Diskarte.*** “*Diskarte*,” according to a cab driver is “*sariling paraan*,” which literally means one’s own way. So is it any wonder that a favorite song in “videoke” joints is Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” (which has said to have even triggered brawls when drunks sing it their way)? Our technical assistant understands



*diskarte* to mean resourcefulness, being “boy scout,” *maabilidad* or has street-smart abilities, life skills to get by. For a motherly administrative assistant, *diskarte* pertains to men who court girls. Strategies in life and coping mechanisms are what the word means to a female teacher. These are for her as necessary as formal education, if not even more important.

I asked a student of mine what “*diskarte*” means to her, and she texted back, “The ability to achieve your goal given the limitations with the use of skills and wit.” When I asked the rest of the class whether *diskarte* is good or bad, most of them said it was good for the person pulling it off, but one said it was bad, because that person might step on others. So one shot back, “So his *diskarte* should be done well so that he would not step on others.”

A young male teacher actually defines *diskarte* as *nakakagawa ng paraan maski hindi pwede, maski nakakahiya na, kapal ng mukha* (doing things even unethically, shamelessly just to be able to reach one’s goal). Apparently he has been on the shoving end of those with reckless *diskarte*.

When it comes to wending through the streets of Manila whether driving or on foot, the *diskarte* of one can pose a hazard to another, like when running red lights or crossing in prohibited places, but this certainly gets them through, until maybe another ma-*diskarte* fellow fails to avoid them in time.

“**Style**”. Style, according to my officemates, is the set of specific and concrete things in the *diskarte* or set of strategies. Or as one of them put it, “*kung paano dumiskarte*.” But often, it comes as part of the negative quip “SMB” or “*style mo bulok*,” as some irritated drivers would shout to fellow drivers or even to mulcting traffic aides and policemen as they leave the scene. Apparently, the traffic cops and aides had pulled some “*dilihensya*,” or “*kotong*.”

***Dilihensiya***. *Dilihensiya*, ironically, really means diligence or industriousness. However, in street slang, it has come to refer

to the mulcting activities of the traffic enforcers and street barkers. The swing to the negative side of this word for a virtue could be part of the Filipino's penchant for ironies in order to laugh off what is clearly a pathetic state of affairs. Indeed, a coping mechanism. *Dilihensya* can also mean borrowing money or scrounging for funds (*pangangalap*).

***Pasimplihan, Simple, or Sumisimple.*** These words have come to mean the stealthy, underhanded, and sneaky way in which both motorists and pedestrians alike traverse the supremely congested streets of the City of Man (as it was termed during Imelda Marcos' time as Metro Manila governor in the 1970s). On the positive side, and when it comes to relationships, it could also mean a way an interested person can drop hints of his affections for another person.

Back on the streets, the cab driver, colleagues, co-passengers, and a conductress define these terms as *patago, hindi halata* (sneaky, not obvious). The conductress even explained to me the codes the traffic enforcers use to see which buses have already been mulcted, and which they should therefore avoid. She showed colored paper cut-outs of triangles, rectangles, and oblongs, and explained which ones mean which. These cut-outs help them, as she said, "*na i-safety na yung trip namin* (to keep our trip hassle-free)." And this brings us to the final word for this essay: *i-safety*.

***I-safety.*** Filipinos have an ingenious way of appropriating English words. Some street-smart people, like our conductress put prefixes to the noun safety to conjugate it. It could mean *ingatan* (take care) or *pwede rin itago* (to secure, or put in safekeeping). But the meaning of "safety" within her context can somehow loosely apply to the scavenger's intention when he hid his stuff inside a hole in the waiting shed. Likewise, a watch-your-car boy who offered to put a stone under a tire of the car, "i-safety natin yan" after I parked. But I reassured him "*naka-safety na sa handbrake, huwag nalang.* (No need. The handbrake is working.)" However, when pulling out of the parking space, this boy, of no more than three feet, insisted on stopping the traffic for me, which was not at all safe for him,

because I could not see him as I backed out, and oncoming vehicles were certainly ignoring him... all for a measly tip.

Nick Joaquin, in his essay “A Heritage of Smallness,” which is on *tingi* (or piecemeal) mentality, deplored the needless risks the cigarette boys take to just be able to sell a stick of cigarette. But he must have disregarded the context of the ambulant cigarette vendors whose *diskarte* and *pasimple* earn them their meager earnings to the tune of peso coins and feel of crumpled bills. These are their only ways of securing their families’ safety, doing it their way, more so if they cannot have other means of *dilihensya*.

Likewise, Bourdieu’s theory of practice can framework the manner of acquiring the gestures and expressions, and even the very predisposition to behaving, communicating and feeling as they do. What is amazing is the manner in which those who are not even in that social group adjust their behavior to the street jive when they go to, say the Quiapo area. Thus people adapt to the situation, which has some prescribed *diskarte* concretized in personal “style” that might include some *pa-simple*, if one should sneak in something not legal (like a bribe) and *dilihensiya*, if one has to augment one’s resources, the way some law enforcers do this *pa-simple*, mulcting hapless motorists and vendors. It is interesting to note that the jeepney barkers’ “income” or tip from the drivers has been upgraded from *dilihensiya* to *bayad*, as one of them explained to me, making it sound as if it were for a service rendered.

## CATCHING FLIES ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

However, courting danger as a way of life is not true only for people who have meager means and limited spaces to move within. People of better economic status also get themselves in such brinkmanship mode.

Can the *pa-simple*, *diskarte*, style, and *dilihensiya* apply also in the academic setting, especially if we look at the cases of people who court danger by plagiarizing? Apparently, the

young male colleague who has a negative view of *diskarte* had his share of anecdotes on cheating. Without naming names—much less saying it was his own story (if it were)—he recounted how a young teacher discovered his old freshman formal composition paper got passed down through batches of his fraternity ‘brods’ with very little modifications.

In the plagiarism incident I cited, she initially said it was just a few lines (the ones I underlined as eerily similar to another student’s paper). Then when I “googled” one common line, I discovered that she had copied the *entire* essay from one of our former students who is now in medicine proper. She admitted she was under stress at that time and so sought the easy way out by submitting what she thought she was just going to use as a guide.

Bourdieu would be referring to the internet research as part of the *habitus* we have now been using, and the predisposition to “use it as guide” would be, in principle, the prescription of the structure of the cyberspace sources with regard to the structure of the educational institution and its requirements. The nexus of the two structures would have to be the learning process *in* the student. Could something have gone wrong in her processing of the whole exercise? And if more of these students would be predisposed to have this *habitus* (of downloading everything without an iota of revision, with no acknowledgment of sources but passing it off as their own) could the whole structure be re-structured—warped—unless something internal to the educational structure be done that would hopefully percolate in the students?

I heard her out and got the “thick description” of her predicament. She said she was under tremendous pressure from her studies and her initiation rites into a sorority, from which she said she eventually quit. She also has a budding modeling career online, which she said she keeps to the side. But focusing on her “technologized” self, with her access to internet sources and her skills in the digital media, among other things, and her understanding of the assignment (which is to review, and assess the relevance of, Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* in

her young life), I am trying to “construct a reading” of her as one who downloaded the 2008 paper (which reflects the life of another person) without qualms. Her “self” therefore got overwritten or replaced in the process, at least in how she submitted that work as her own.

In this day and age where the global and local meld into the worldwide web, and where the consumers become themselves producers in the way in which social networking sites have democratized the media, the plethora and traffic of information can be at times discombobulating, so much so that these information go undigested by many people who just gobble them up. It truly is a web of meaning in a slightly different sense. The cyberspace vendors for free essays run in the hundreds, and counting... Among these are:

- a. OPPAPERS.COM (<https://www.oppapers.com/join.php#submit>)
- b. ExampleEssays.com (<http://www.exampleessays.com/signupnow.html>)
- c. 123 Helpme!com (<http://www.123helpme.com/>)
- d. All Free Essays.com (<http://www.allfreeessays.com/>)
- e. FastEssays.com.uk (<http://fastessays.co.uk/blog/essay-writing/essays-for-free>)
- f. Ra-DoingMyHomework.com (<http://www.aboutus.org/Ra-DoingMyHomework.com>)
- g. TermPaper blog.com (<http://termpaper-blog.com/writing-help/examples-of-descriptive-essays-for-free>)

There are even some discipline-specific ones in the professional schools like in Law:

h. Law Teacher. The Law Essay Professionals. Buy your law essays from us. (<http://www.lawteacher.net/scan-for-plagiarism.php>)

And, yes, in the Graduate school.



i. (<http://www.masterpapers.com/blog/essay-writing-tips/free-persuasive-essays/>)

There is even one in Bangladeshi: kannada essays for free downloads



j. <http://www.24dunia.com/gujarati-news/search/kannada-essays-for-free-downloads.html>

Then there are personal blog sites, like this, which I copy-pasted:



*“ESSAYS FOR FREE. I’m currently a student in med school and I’m highly accelerated. Call me crazy, but I love to write essays. Just send me you essay topic, criteria included, and whether or not a webography is required or not. It’s simple just e-mail me personally at MissJarvis777@yahoo.com. You’ll receive your essay within 72 hours.”*

k. <http://www.redgaze.com/blogs/essaysforfree/essaysforfree.html>

I guess her client would have to proof-read her work really well before submitting it. And the list of essay peddlers goes on. Not included of course are people like that medical student who uploaded his work to his blog spot where it was fair game for anybody; he claimed he did not know those students who plagiarized his work.

Brinkmanship as a way of life varies in form and substance across social groups, but it is a *diskarte* that is resorted to for various reasons. My student’s case appears paltry, compared to high level and famous plagiarisms happening elsewhere, like the 2010 Supreme Court plagiarism issue, the business tycoon’s graduation address, and a senator’s speech. Likewise, hazardous practices in the streets have time and again seen useless deaths, so much so that a road safety video that has gone viral have this haunting jingle “Dumb Ways to Die.” The level of sophistication of brinkmanship may vary according to the context, but people seem to share a level of carelessness and sense of desperation that they opt to follow some sneaky and dangerous course of action unto the edge of safety. The



adrenalin rush of getting away with it (whew!) can even give a kick, encouraging encores, creating habits, getting the hang of it.

But how “letting it slide” can deform people and society! It would be like riding a tiger, and as the limerick I quoted above said: “They returned from the ride with the lady inside and the smile on the face of the tiger.”

As a topic of concern and the core of anthropology, the “person” has been defined and redefined, and now in the internet, digitally defined, even in HD (high definition), where social networking sites can feature a new construct of the person. Henrietta Moore from the same essay writes: “We are all now technologized selves in some very important sense. One consequence of this is that the boundaries of the self are expanded, and often breached. The self is no longer, if it ever was, a singular, self-contained entity, but a participating, relational one; and one which is no longer simply human... the availability and the speed with which technological productions diffuse makes everyone a producer of knowledge about technology to some degree or other (1996: 7).” And, as she said in her introduction in 2006 *Anthropology in Theory*, “culture is a consequence of our humanity—our sociality—rather than a pre-condition for it... humans are not, strictly speaking, socially constructed.”

Now, if I may put in another perspective, one which Ludwig Wittgenstein would rather pass over in silence, it puts its finger right on the raw nerve when it says “Man is the mysterious compound of body and soul, closely united to form but one nature and one person. Man is the nexus, the point of contact between the spiritual and material substances, an abstract of all the marvels of creation. He is a little world gathering in itself all the worlds, a microcosm showing forth the wisdom of God who united in this fashion two things so far apart (Tanqueray).”

At core therefore is the human person, who is responsible for culture-building, more than he/she can ever know, who

continues to weave webs of meaning, and whose dignity calls for no less than respect and the right to the honest development of oneself. A strong conviction of this would make people less predisposed to engage in brinkmanship, courting danger *needlessly*, selling oneself or one's talent cheap, or lying to others, which would really be lying to oneself, thickly or not.

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