

# A Conceptual and Psychological Analysis of *Sumpong*

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*Sumpong* is a curious concept. It is a convenient "explanation" when one says in exasperation, "Ay, ewan ko, may *sumpong* yata yon!" (I don't know; he must be having a fit or something!) Imagine this in connection with one puzzling over his roommate's unusual behavior. Similarly, imagine one who finally gives up and declares the TV to be in state of *sumpong* after tinkering with the TV controls to get a clear picture.

The range of the term *sumpong* becomes even more evident when one, not being able to explain *sumpong* more elaborately, at least tries to determine the locus of causation and control. Some people will tell you that it comes from the outside; it is not within one's control. Others will tell you that it is spontaneous and usually recurrent, but irrelevant to external precipitating factors. Apparently, there is a shuffling or even virtual absence of locus of responsibility: i.e., *Sumpong* just happens; one does not deliberately do it, but neither can others usually attribute it to any external object or event.

Furthermore, while there is a *bigla* (sudden, unpredictable) and unexplainable quality of behavior associated with *sumpong*, a person who possesses *sumpong* as a personality trait, i.e., one who is *sumpunging*, may be predictably unpredictable. Ordinarily non-*sumpunging* people can have bursts of *sumpong*, or they are said to be *may sumpong*, an episode which merits more attention than chronic *sumpungin* behavior.

All these go to show that *sumpong* is a rather complicated phenomenon, which cannot be characterized uni-dimensionally. Even an attempted dictionary definition fails to do it justice. Consider the concise definition given by Panganiban (1972) in his *Diksiyunaryo-Tesaurus*: *Sumpong* = periodic manifestation, e.g., of disease, lunacy. Synonyms are *atake*, *sigla* (colloquial *singga*); cf. *sasal*, *silakbo*. However, a phenomenological study of the term *sumpong* among its users shows that periodic recurrence is only one of the connotations of the word.

In the light of the many varied reactions elicited by the term *sumpong*, this paper is an attempt to systematize the various shades, meanings, and impressions that have been elicited by the term. It will also explore some possible psychological implications of this phenomenon called *sumpong* in relation to Philippine culture.

Before delving into the meaning of *sumpong*, it would be helpful to get a random view of how many aspects of Filipino life are connected with *sumpong*: (1) Food habits, e.g., *Sinusumpong ako ngayon. Gusto kong kumain ng matamis.* (Right now I have *sumpong*, I'd

like to eat something sweet.); (2) Work habits, e.g., "He is *sumpungin* in his work; you can not rely on him."; (3) Folklore and superstitions, e.g., *Sinusumpung siya dahil kinukulam*. (He has *sumpong*, because he is accursed or possessed.) The *sumpong* in this case can be physiological (sickness) or behavioral (strange actions); (4) Sickness, e.g., *Sinusumpung siya ng malaria, ng lagnat*, atbp. (He has *sumpong* of malaria, fever, etc.); (5) Personality, e.g., A teacher who is *sumpunging* is *mabait* (nice) and generous at times and *salbabe* (cruel) at others; (6) Artistic temperament, e.g., A creative person is expected to have his bursts of *sumpong* in order to work well. In Yepez's study (1973), one non-artist interviewed remarked that so called creative people seem to feel that they have a right to *sumpong* in the name of creativity.

Metaphorical extensions of the concept *sumpong* further illustrate its prevalence in Filipino life. Aside from being used to describe persons, *sumpong* may also be applied to objects and events. For instance, appliances such as TV, lighters, and calculators are said to be *sinusumpung* when they give erratic performance. The weather may also be depicted quite appropriately in the following manner; "*Pasumpung-sumpong and langit; umuulan at umaaraw*. (The sky is *pasumpung-sumpong*; it rains one minute and shines the next.)"

#### MEANINGS OF THE TERM *SUMPONG*

What is common to all the above uses of the term *sumpong*? Apparently, the term *sumpong* is a very flexible one, as may be seen in the wide variation of associative responses elicited by it. Respondents differ by attaching more, or less, importance to differ aspects of the word. For example, one might stress the spontaneous and indeterministic nature of the behavior; another might stress its duration and cyclical or recurring element; still another might focus on the hostile and aggressive behavior patterns generated by it.

Probably the nearest English term to *sumpong* would be *mood*, then followed by *fit*; terms like *depression* and *tantrum* may follow suit, but the latter imply too much specific content to reflect comprehensively different types, patterns, and styles of *sumpong*. As will be amplified below, these are some common denominators to all *sumpong* episodes, although there are different varieties or manifestations of *sumpong*. In fact, contrasting behaviors may be generated in different manifestations of *sumpong*.

The following is a list of meanings that are associated with the word *sumpong*; they will be divided into the common characteristics and the varied types of *sumpong* manifestations.

#### ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF *SUMPONG*

These are the common denominators intrinsic to *sumpong*; they are true of all manners of *sumpong*. At least six different characteristics have been identified as essential to *sumpong*. These are: (1) a deviation from what is usual, (2) temporary duration, (3) cyclical and recurring nature, (4) not directly explainable, (5) irrelevant behaviors, and (6) non-eliberateness.

### **Deviation from what is usual**

This is most often cited definition; although the exception of chronic *sumponging* must be noted, its differences is more in terms of frequency than in quality, i.e., the unusual is so usual it becomes usual.

This deviational aspect of *sumpong* represents the "What's got into him?" or the "He is not himself" syndrome. *Sumpong* therefore is not a deviation from what is "normal" or usual for the culture; but for the person in particular. Basically, this change does not have any evaluative component because one could change from bad to good just as he can from good to bad. Changing from good to bad is, however, either more frequent or more frequently detected, which is why *sumpong* often acquires a negative connotation and, in that context, it means a disturbance, a malady.

### **Temporary duration**

While a burst of *sumpong* does last for a while (since it is not just a matter of removing a specific irritant), one does not expect a burst of *sumpong* to last forever. In fact, that explains why people accept it and dismiss it casually by shrugging their shoulders. "Tiisin na lang" while it is on. Sometimes people console themselves about an otherwise intolerable state of affairs by saying "sumpong lang yon." This perspective could change their attitude altogether. If people thought or knew that a deviating event was going to last indefinitely, they would not call it *sumpong*.

### **Cyclical, recurring nature**

Another peculiar aspect of the term *sumpong* is that it is not ordinarily used for a deviating event that is just happening for the first time, or for one time only. In attributing a malady to *sumpong*, a history of recurring (whether fixed or variable interval) events of the same kind is implied. For instance, when we first discover a patient's fever, asthma, arthritis, schizophrenia, or whatever, we would not use the term *sumpong*. But when whatever malady goes off and comes back again, then we say, "Sinusumpong siya ng lagnat" or whatever. In this sense, *sumpong* is like an *atake* (attack) or a fit. Even for positive events like creativity or industriousness, when we say "sinusumpong siya ng kasipagan," we generally do not mean it as a one-and-only-one isolated episode.

The cyclical nature of *sumpong* easily lends itself to associations with the seasons or other natural events of a cyclical nature. The moon is quite universally associated with moods or even with mental illness itself. In fact, the very term *lunacy* comes from the word that means *moon*. Likewise, in the Philippines, a full moon is often blamed for erratic behavior. A Bicolano synonym for *sumpong*, *bubulanon*, actually comes from *bulan*, which means moon.

### **No apparent explanation**

One cannot put his finger on the exact, specific precipitating incident for a *sumpong* episode. Take for instance the "sinusumpong ng lagnat" case; nobody can explain why the fever suddenly recurs, except to describe it as a symptom of the disease. Coming

closer to interpersonal interaction, while in the case of *tampo* (a very frequent word-association for *sumpong*), one can identify the immediately preceding variable, e.g., a refused request, and make amends for it; in *sumpong*, sweet-talking or cajoling can easily fall on deaf ears. *Sumpong*, therefore, is a state, which is more pervasive and more vague than *tampo*.

Although others may sometimes give a cause for *sumpong*, the cause is not hardly apparent to the person himself, nor does it have a logical or compelling relation to his behavior.

### **Irrelevant behaviors**

Related to the pervasive and vague notion of *sumpong*, the individual "suffering" from it usually does not know himself—what he wants or what he is doing. He becomes "not himself," so to say. He performs behaviors, which seem irrelevant to his goals as well as to antecedent events. For example, a harmless comment may throw him into a temper tantrum. Also, there is a displaced quality about aggression if it is involved; the person may vent anger on a scapegoat or make *dabog* (e.g., throw things around, bang doors). *Sumpong* behavior is therefore traditionally characterized as illogical, irrational, or irrelevant to the stimulus situation.

Even if *sumpong* were applied to inanimate objects and diseases, the irrelevant "behavior" of the object or the disease to the external situation is still implied. The TV "behaves" quite irrelevantly to the manipulations made on it; the fever recurs as if no medicine had been taken.

### **Non-deliberate—"just happens"**

The absence of willfulness or deliberation in *sumpong* accounts for its excuseability. The person involved in *sumpong* is at the mercy of the moon, fate, biorhythm, or whatever. He is not really responsible for it. Although to some extent he may be judged by how he handles it or gets over it, he has no control over its origin, and therefore a decent recovery period should be allowed. Since the person is "not himself," he should not be judged. It is a very mild form of pleading insanity—"pleading *sumpong*!"

While "non-deliberate" may be unsuitable to describe inanimate objects and events, the term "it just happens" suffices.

## **TYPES OF *SUMPONG* MANIFESTATIONS**

These are varying emotional and behavior patterns which, added to the main trunk of essential characteristics, give specific character to each *sumpong* episode. Although the manifestations to be presented may be more illustrative than exhaustive, four of the most common types will be identified and discussed. These will be ordered according to frequency of occurrence, as determined by the number of respondents who described each type of manifestation. Finally, it should be noted that although the different types of *sumpong* may not be mutually exclusive, they are distinct enough to be differentiated.

### Aggressive sumpung

In this common type of *sumpong*, the individual always expresses some anger, whether by means of hostile facial expression or overt aggressive behavior. Usually, there is no specific target but a general displeasure with all that the individual interacts with. Hostile or aggressive *sumpong* may be manifested in the following ways:

*Madaling uminit ang ulo, nagdadabog* (hot-headed, bangs and throws things)  
*Masungit, mahirap pakibagayan* (cranky, hard to understand and deal with)  
*Naiinis, naiinip, nakasimangot* (impatient, irritable, scowling)

### Withdrawing sumpung

In this type of *sumpong*, the individual retreats, withdraws, or even escapes from the scene, be it the social scene, the work scene, or whatever. Even if he is physically present, he erects psychological barriers between himself and the interacting environment. He is uncommunicative and unapproachable, and may resort to sulking. In some cases, he may also be unproductive. Very often this kind of *sumpong* is also associated with depression. Withdrawing *sumpong* may be manifested in the following ways:

*Nagmumukmok, tahimik, ayaw makipag-usap o hindi maka-usap* (sulky, silent, will not speak or be spoken to)  
*Nasa sulok* (literally, in a corner, i.e., keep to oneself; unapproachable). One respondent even described the person as *suwapang sa pagkatao niya*, which literally means "greedy about his own person" and therefore very unapproachable.  
*Matabang, hindi pinapansin ang ibang tao* (Insipid, pays no attention to people.)  
*Tamad, di-makagalaw; di-makakilos* (lazy, motionless).

### High-spirited sumpung

In contrast to withdrawing *sumpong* is high-spirited *sumpong*, where the individual is markedly excitable, high-spirited, and active. In this variety of *sumpong* one may lose some of his usual inhibitions and become highly impulsive and adventuresome. He may also become unexpectedly bold in joking and clowning, sometimes to the point of distraction. High-spirited *sumpong* may be manifested in the following ways:

*Silakbo ng damdamin* (Impulsiveness)  
*Manloloko, tarwa ng tarwa* (Fooling others, laughing and laughing)

### Highly specified sumpung

Examples of this are incidents of *sumpong sa bait* (*sumpong* of goodness), *sa sipag* (of industriousness), etc. The only reason such incidents get attention is their deviation from what is usual for the individual. Thus, a terribly misbehaved child may astonish everyone with his *sumpong sa bait*; a regularly indolent fellow may raise eyebrows with his *sumpong sa sipag*.

DEFINITIONS OF *SUMPONG*

In the light of all the meanings of the term *sumpong* reviewed, the following working definition may be advanced: *Sumpong* is a temporary and spontaneous but often recurring and unexplainable deviation from what the norm is for an individual, object, or event. To the extent that the deviation is considered temporary and unexplainable, it is a state or behavior regarded as trivial and not necessitating any significant action.

## RELATED FILIPINO CONCEPTS

Respondents also gave many of the specific contents or symptoms given in the preceding section as concepts related to the term *sumpong*. Their relation to *sumpong*, apparently, is that they are manifestations of the general state of *sumpong*, or they are "*sumpong* behaviors," although they do not all have to occur together. In addition to them, the concepts of *baltik*, *tampo*, *sama ng loob*, and *init ng ulo* were given:

*Baltik*—Similar to *sumpong* but more hostile; characterized by erratic bursts of hot-headedness. The popular cartoon strip which has also been made into a TV series entitled *Baltic and Company*, portrays a boss, Mr. Baltic, who is given to fits of anger at the slightest provocation (De Quiroz, 1977).

*Tampo*—Shares some of the behavioral manifestations of *sumpong*, e.g., sulking, keeping to oneself and refusing to cooperate or even to accept favors. However, *tampo* is different in that it has a readily identifiable origin, usually an external, interpersonal event (see Daza, 1975). *Sumpong*, on the other hand, is more of an internal state with no identifiable cause, or the cause may be farfetched (not a logical one).

*Sama ng loob*—A nursed hurt or ill feeling towards another. The reason, as in *tampo*, is readily identifiable to the person himself, but may not necessarily be evident to the object of the ill feeling. More usually, the object of the ill feeling is somebody the person prefers not to aggress directly against by virtue of his status or his "closeness" (e.g., friend or relative) to the person. Often, *sama ng loob* becomes known to its object through an intermediary (see Samonte, 1973).

*Init ng ulo*—More overt; corresponds to "hot-headedness" in English as well as similar symbols of speech in most languages. Little nuance is implied; the term describes behavior and behavioral dispositions characterized by a low threshold for aggression regardless of cause or origin.

*SUMPONG* IN OTHER PHILIPPINE AND ASIAN LANGUAGES?

While it is not very clear to what extent the complete nuances of the term *sumpong* are kept intact, generally, such a concept appears translatable into other Malayo-Polynesian languages. All the major Philippine languages have some equivalent for *sumpong*. Bikolanos use the term *lubat*, or *bubulanon*, the latter deriving from *bulan* or moon, as was already pointed out. In Samamon-Leyte, either *busyu* or *abot* could mean something like a *sumpong* state; *abut-abot* is also used in Hiligaynon and Sugbuhanon. In Cebuano, as well as Samamon-Leyte, we find *sugmat* or *saput*. The Kapampangan *sompong* is simply a slight

difference in spelling, but the Pangasinan *daraepen* sounds very different indeed. Ilocanos claim their *agmuryot* is more volatile than *sumpong*, but therefore is more like aggressive *sumpong*, but another Ilocano term *agpacaro* refers more to unexpected mood changes or a turn of events. *Sumpong* also has an equivalent in the Malay-Indonesian language, namely, *muram* or *murong*. All of these translations allow us to conclude that the concept of *sumpong*, whether in its entirety or a significant part thereof, is expressible in languages sharing a Malayo-Polynesian heritage.

The fact that *sumpong* is expressible in other Malayo-Polynesian languages is all the more significant when we examine other Asian languages and find this concept missing. Other Asian languages are more likely to have a term whose meaning is nearer to *tampo* (externally caused) than *sumpong* (somewhat spontaneous), e.g., *Sunero* in Japanese (see Salazar, 1975) and *Nakhra* in Hindi. In Chinese, there is no known word for *tampo* or *sumpong* in Mandarin but there are terms of *tampo* in some dialects, e.g., Fookien (*chwa*, *tiyung*).

#### EVALUATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE TERM *SUMPONG*

Earlier it had been mentioned that inasmuch as changes from good to bad are either more frequent or more frequently detected than changes from bad to good, the word *sumpong* has a somewhat negative connotation. But the connotation is not completely negative for two reasons: First, there are also deviations from bad to good, for which the term is also used, as in describing, for instance, a tightwad who suddenly decides to give a blowout. Second, inconsistency, whether from good to bad or from bad to good, is not unequivocally considered undesirable. Occasional bursts of *sumpong* may be varied as necessary to being a "believable and human" person, not a machine. *Sumpong* is therefore treated like an individual assertion against a mechanized, routinary way of life. Antonio Perez, an artist and psychologist, commented in an interview that *sumpong* has an element of "cuteness" in it—possibly because it is more often associated with females and with children, and with very creative persons. This "cuteness" also derives from the apparent triviality and lack of responsibility associated with *sumpong* as contrasted with other bad moods like *sama ng loob* (more somber) and *init ng ulo* (more negative).

Ultimately, the evaluate judgment of the word *sumpong* depends on who is looking at it. Persons who vary considerably on such dimensions as tight-loose, rigid-flexible, rational-emotional, etc., are expected to differ in their tolerance and evaluation of *sumpong* behavior.

#### CULTURAL ATTITUDE TOWARD *SUMPONG*

The general attitude of the culture towards *sumpong* is one of acceptance for reasons already mentioned: triviality, lack of responsibility, transience, etc. The culture not only accepts *sumpong* behavior in resignation; it reinforces such behavior to some extent by giving special treatment such as "*Mag-ingat ka rryan, may sumpong 'yan*," or by humoring, such as "*Magtago na kayo, nagagalit na naman ang hari*."

It is possible that *sumpong* serves as a compensatory mechanism that allows for idiosyncrasy and subtle antisocial tendencies in a culture where individuality, hostility, and aggression are not very openly expressed. In cultures where more direct expressions of hostility such as griping and protesting are often used, *sumpong* behavior is less tolerated and simply regarded as immature, or deserving psychiatric treatment.

#### SUMPONG—COPING STRATEGY AGAINST A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Enriquez (1977) reconsidered the hypothesis that Filipinos employ an indirect and delayed reaction to frustration and instigation to aggression. While the Filipino has often been noted for his *pagtitiis* (forbearance), this should not be misconstrued a passivity or resignation. An apparently delayed reaction to frustration is better understood in the light of an elaborate art of *pahiwatig* (nonverbal cues) and *pakiramdam* (feeling one's way through a situation). A frustrating event does not give way immediately to verbal abuse because of a cultural disposition towards jesting and testing for limits and reactions. Thus, non-hostile reactions may be attempted first. The Cebuano *mahay* is an example of regret or disappointment over unfulfilled expectations but it is definitely non-aggressive. More colorful is the Tagalog *lambing*, a jestful, childlike, even affectionate way of making demands, which may be tried first should one feel something lacking in a interpersonal relationship. Only if further frustration occurs (e.g., no amends or explanation offered; repeated abuse) is one likely to give way to *tampo* (sulking, turning the cold shoulder), then to *hinanakit* (short-term hurt of ill-feeling) and *sama ng loob* (longer-term), then eventually to overt *galit*. ("Ang tapayan kapag napuno ay umaapaw") aptly describes the supposed Filipino tendency to accumulate frustration and to express his emotions in a step-wise function before overt action is taken (Enriquez, 1977).

In a culture where expression of aggressive emotion to different instigating events is indirect and delayed, various channels may ease the tension when "one's jar overflowed." One such possible channel is *sumpong*, a blanket reaction which could serve to shrug off all perceived and imagined slights and offenses by adopting a generalized lowered threshold for aggression. Identification of the original instigating events is no longer important; nor are the original instigators the only targets for aggression or hostility. In general, one is "mad-with-the-world," and may retreat or lash out or simply act strange depending on his temperament, the targets involved, and other situational factors.

#### CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SUMPONG

In the Filipino context, *sumpong* may serve as a fairly acceptable mode of tension reduction if used with proper frequency and intensity. *Sumpong* offers a time-out, a little vacation from the inevitable pressures that come from living up to the expectations of others most of the time. It is possible that the country's mental health would deteriorate significantly if such a release-mechanism were suddenly withdrawn. However, *sumpong*, being precariously halfway between normality and abnormality (it's a normal abnormality!) can occasionally slip into graver problems classified as pathological. Hysterical outbursts or manic-depressive reactions are likely venues. Lapuz's (1973) descriptions of hysterical behavior in female-Filipino patients, including firing a gun into the air, breaking plates,



etc., and yet not being able to correlate it with the frustrating situation that triggered it, are not unlike exaggerated *sumpong* outbursts.

Diagnostically speaking, while it is not easy to assess at what point danger begins, the notion of a baseline of frequency and intensity could be useful here. For example, if X's baseline indicated one *sumpong* per month with intensity "3," then there is cause for alarm if he suddenly switches to daily episodes or to intensity "6."

### A THEORETICAL MODEL FOR AGGRESSIVE *SUMPONG*

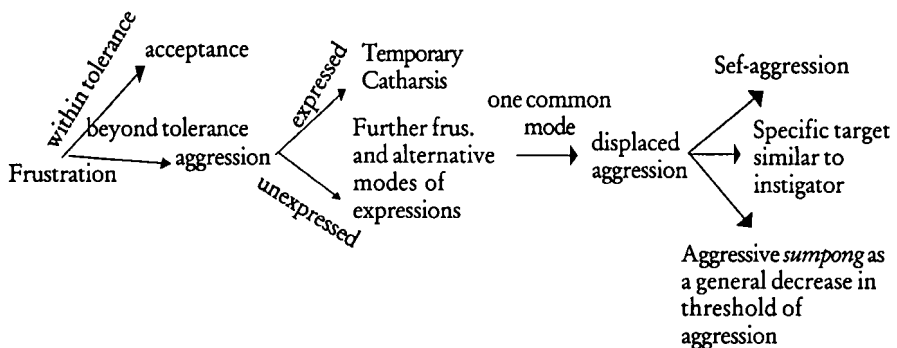
Although it is usually not possible to identify a specific precipitating factor for *sumpong*, more generalized antecedents are considered to be correlated with an increase in the probability of *sumpong*. These are physiological changes (biorhythm, menstrual blues, even "bagong gising"), boredom, neglect, and frustration. Frustration is probably the most representative factor because practically every antecedent boils down to it: your body does not behave the way you want it to; you want change but cannot get it; you want attention but it is denied you.

More farfetched antecedents are believed to reside in personality traits (e.g., immaturity, insecurity, a lack of equilibrium) or in child-rearing patterns (e.g., spoiled) that give rise to these personality traits.

Because of the difficulty of tracking down a comprehensive definition of *sumpong*, the theoretical model to be proposed will consider only the most common type, which is aggressive *sumpong*. This model will also concentrate only on the short-range effects of aggression, omitting the aspect of instrumental learning as a result of expression of aggression (refer to Figure 1).

*Sumpong* in this model is considered an alternative mode of expressing aggression that is less direct but more acceptable. While displaced aggression may take different forms and targets, the displaced aggression present in *sumpong* is more of a general decrease in threshold of aggression. This is consistent with the idea that *sumpong* has no identifiable precipitating factors, but is generalized and pervasive.

Figure 1. A Theoretical Model for the Development of Aggressive *Sumpong*



The concept of "frustration tolerance" is important to the model depicted for understanding *sumpong* because its level may determine whether *sumpong*, mediated by the resulting aggression and its displacement, occurs at all. A frustration tolerance level higher than that called for by the frustrating incident means that the incident just stops there, or is accepted.

The other crux of the model lies in whether there is a suitable expression for aggression or not. Aggression may not be expressed for several reasons: superior status of the instigator to aggression, environmental thwarting, and quite significantly, self-restraint. Thus, when the expression on aggression is prevented, displaced aggression in the form of a general decrease in threshold of aggression is one very common reaction.

Two factors therefore appear to be crucial in leading to an eventual outburst of *sumpong*: these are low frustration tolerance level and thwarted expression of aggression. It may be predicted that individuals who are low in frustration tolerance level and are not able to express aggression (due to low status, threat or self-restraint) would have the highest incidence of *sumpong* outbursts. On the other hand, those who have high frustration tolerance and are also able to express their aggression (due to high status, absence of threat, or an "open personality") would have the lowest incidence of *sumpong*. Intermediately, a person who has low frustration and a person who has a high frustration tolerance and inhibited expression of aggression are likely to display a moderate incidence of *sumpong*.

It is important to realize that frustration tolerance and self-restraint could be independent of each other, i.e., one could have low frustration tolerance and yet high restraint and this makes him a most likely candidate for *sumpong*; or a person with low frustration tolerance and low status which restrains him from expressing aggression may also resort to *sumpong*. On the other hand, a very mature person possessing high frustration tolerance who is also of high-status in the social hierarchy (no thwarting in expression) can directly express the little aggression that he will probably have, and will be a very unlikely candidate for the *sumpong* syndrome. All in all, the incidence of *sumpong* appears to depend heavily on both personality and situational variables. A more extensive study may well de-mystify this supposedly unexplainable phenomenon.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>These meanings were derived using the method of *pagtatanung-tanong*, a relatively non-reactive, naturalistic and Filipino-oriented research method based on informal interviewing (see Gonzales, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Based on Panganiban's *Diskyunaryo-Tesaurus* and informal interviewing.

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