

REVIEW

BOOK

**Tangkad, talino, talento: Insights from Gideon Lasco’s Height Matters**

“Tangkad, talino, talento” is the tagline of a popular multivitamin marketed to enhance children’s height, appetite, and overall health. The slogan works because it speaks directly to parental aspirations: height promises visibility and advantage, intelligence suggests opportunity, and talent hints at future success. Yet beyond its marketing appeal, the tagline also reflects the hierarchical valuation of qualities within Philippine society—what parents and, by extension, communities consider worth pursuing and celebrating.

In the Philippines, where aspirations often rise as high as the towers of Makati yet are weighed down by the inescapable pull of circumstance, height becomes more than a physical measure. It comes to signify destiny: shaping the way people see themselves, the opportunities they believe they deserve, and the dreams they dare to hold. Gideon Lasco’s *Height Matters* invites readers to pause and examine this mundane preoccupation, asking what it means when the body itself, particularly its verticality, becomes a site of aspiration, inequality, and identity.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “body capital”, Lasco situates height not merely as a biological fact but as a form of social currency that can either open doors or keep them shut. And yet, even as height is mostly genetically determined, Lasco reveals how families and communities invest in practices meant to defy or at least negotiate this limit: drinking supplements, observing strict bedtimes, pursuing better nutrition, and even invoking genetic “luck” through marriage. *Height Matters* thus shows the body as never entirely one’s own but as a collective project shaped by the aspirations and anxieties of those around it. This tension, between the body’s apparent fixity and the social practices seeking to transform it, anchors some of the book’s most compelling insights.

**The Historization of Height**

The Philippines, as Lasco notes, was not designed for tall people: low ceilings, cramped jeepneys, and narrow hallways signal a material environment shaped by

smaller bodies. Yet at the same time, its social imagination places a premium on verticality. Historically, this emphasis is closely tied to American colonial legacies. The “little brown brother” trope cast Filipinos as racially inferior, their bodies marked as smaller and weaker. Within this context, tallness came to be associated with aspiration, reflecting colonial ideals of physical stature as a symbol of progress, respectability, and belonging.

This valuation of height has also seeped into the labor market, further shaping material aspirations. Service-oriented occupations like flight attendants, hotel staff, and security personnel often impose minimum height requirements. These requirements do not simply reflect the presumed advantages of tallness; they actively reinforce them, structuring the relationship between physical stature and socioeconomic mobility. For young people from less affluent families, height can appear as a literal and figurative threshold to opportunity. By contrast, wealthier families with access to education, networks, and capital, height becomes less central to securing a future.

Bourdieu’s insights sharpen this point: the body, he argues, is a bearer of capital, not only through its capacity for labor but also through the distinctions it acquires via discipline, cultivation, and display. In the Philippine context, the premium placed on tallness functions as an imperialist legacy, a bodily hierarchy inherited from the American period yet reproduced in contemporary job markets, media imagery, and even everyday aspirations.

## The Height Investment

The strength of Lasco’s work lies in its ethnographic richness. Through interviews and narratives, he draws readers into the intimate worlds of families who pin their hopes on their children growing taller, of young people measuring their worth against height charts, and of communities where aspirations rise as vertically as the bodies they imagine for themselves.

What makes *Height Matters* stand out is how these personal accounts are woven into broader social and historical contexts. Height is not an individual concern; it is a communal one. A child’s growth becomes the family’s project; collective pride swells when someone defies the genetic odds. Height, in this sense, operates both as a noun and a verb: a project under construction, but also a projection of what families and communities dream of becoming. As Deleuze<sup>1</sup> reminds us, “a body affects other bodies and is affected by other bodies;” height, too, acquires its meaning only in relation to the aspirations, comparisons, and expectations that surround it.

This communal dimension helps explain why height so often overshadows other qualities in everyday life. Comments like “Hindi siya maganda/gwapo, pero matangkad,” reveal how verticality often eclipses other traits. Intelligence and talent, for instance, lack the immediate physicality that height commands. A tall

child can be imagined as a future basketball star, beauty queen, or flight attendant, their bodies seemingly destined for public visibility. In a country where basketball reigns supreme, height becomes intertwined with the national imagination itself: the Gilas Pilipinas team attracts far more immediate attention and adoration than athletes like Carlos Yulo, whose fame rests on proven international victories; a reminder that some readily inherit national pride, while others earn it.

For those who lack height, there emerges an unspoken need to compensate (or even overcompensate) in other domains such as intelligence, wit, humor, or wealth. For example, it is not enough to be clever; one must be exceptionally clever.

This dynamic is especially evident in popular media, where characters who fall outside conventional ideals of attractiveness rarely occupy leading roles without qualification. When they do, their stories often rely on comedy, irony, or the redemption of the “less attractive” character, implying that desirability remains contingent on mainstream beauty standards. The picture becomes even more complex when we consider that Filipino notions of height and attractiveness are shaped by Western ideals: while the average Filipino height ranges from 4’11” to 5’4”, our image of what is “tall” or “ideal” often extends beyond our local realities.

In this way, height becomes a form of investment—a family’s *puhunan*, into which they pour resources, whether through supplements, nutrition, or medical interventions. It promises returns in social capital, opportunity, and even imagined mobility. Yet height often escapes explicit scrutiny, so normalized in everyday life that it becomes invisible even as it structures inequality and aspiration.

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## Socioeconomic Considerations

As Lasco observes, height-making factors, from nutrition to healthcare access, are profoundly shaped by socioeconomic resources. Dietary practices illustrate this clearly. Many lower-income Filipino families rely on affordable staples such as margarine, which has long been marketed as a height enhancer despite offering little real nutritional value. Protein intake, a key determinant of growth, also varies widely depending on a household’s purchasing power.

From this perspective, malnutrition, and by extension, stunting, emerges not as a purely “natural” outcome but as a socially produced phenomenon, reflecting the uneven distribution of food, income, and health resources. Affluent families can afford diets richer in protein and micronutrients, partly explaining why children in elite private schools often grow taller than their public school counterparts, even as stunting rates remain stubbornly high nationwide.

Of course, height retains an element of unpredictability; exceptions exist across all social classes. Yet this very uncertainty reinforces the sense that height is a matter of individual biology rather than social structure, masking how deeply class and inequality shape growth itself. Lasco makes clear that what appears natural is, in fact, profoundly political.

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## Reflections

What I find most cogent in Lasco's work is how it unsettles taken-for-granted ideas about the body. It forces us to ask: When does the body stop being a purely personal matter and become a canvas for societal expectations? At what point does aspiration tip into anxiety, or pride into prejudice? Lasco gestures toward these tensions but leaves enough space for readers to wrestle with them themselves. His book made me think about how stereotypes tied to height can quietly shape opportunities and interactions, often in ways we fail to name because height feels so natural, so self-evident.

Lock and Farquhar<sup>2</sup> remind us that "the body is an assemblage of practices, discourses, images, institutional arrangements, and specific places and projects." This lens helps make sense of Lasco's argument: bodies carry the weight of history, policy, kinship, and aspiration all at once. Where, then, does individual agency begin? Height emerges not as a neutral biological fact but as a site where personal hopes and structural conditions meet.

Reading the book also prompted moments of self-reflection. I currently stand at 5'1" but I vividly remember growing up to spoonfuls of Growee and Cherifer. Every morning my mother prepared these alongside a hefty breakfast and a reminder to drink my water throughout the day. Small investments driven by a quiet hope that I could someday outrun my genetic material but alas, did not. In nursing school, I was teased for struggling to reach high shelves or adjust IV drips; the seasoned nurses said I was cute for needing to use a step stool to assist in the surgeries or even just glimpse the operating field. What felt like personal quirks then now read differently: as experiences produced by the material and social meanings attached to height in the Philippines. Lasco is right, height's seeming ordinariness hides its multidimensionality.

Finally, what stayed with me is the communality of height-making. Reality illustrates how families pool resources—an aunt paying for vitamins and height boosters, a grandparent cooking protein-rich meals, a mother making sure her children take their afternoon naps and don't stay up too late at night—so that a child might grow taller. It takes a village, quite literally. This resonates with the Filipino concept of *kapwa*: the sense of shared identity and responsibility that binds families and communities. Perhaps this is the most profound insight of *Height Matters*: that height, often imagined as individual fate, is in fact a collective project sustained by kinship and care.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *Height Matters* is less about centimeters and inches than about the worlds of meaning built upon them. Lasco's ethnography shows how height becomes a site where aspirations, inequalities, and histories converge—how bodies

carry not just genes but also the weight of culture, economy, and politics. **To talk about height, then, is to talk about how families dream, how societies stratify, and how people imagine rising above circumstance. Height, ordinary as it seems, reveals the extraordinary entanglement of biology and belonging.**

## Notes

1. Deleuze, G. (1992). Ethology: Spinoza and us. *Incorporations*, 625-633.
2. Lock, M. M., & Farquhar, J. (2007). *Beyond the body proper: Reading the anthropology of material life*. Duke University Press.

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