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Chicken, Egg, or Both? Disentangling Disposition and Distrust in Filipino Attitudes Toward Government Dole-Outs

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Abstract

Filipino public discourse frequently characterizes reliance on government assistance, particularly dole-out programs such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), as evidence of a fixed “dependency mentality,” even as the same public consistently expresses distrust toward government institutions on grounds of corruption and inconsistent delivery. This conceptual paper interrogates that apparent contradiction, asking whether reliance on a distrusted government reflects an inherent dispositional trait or a rational, structurally conditioned response. Drawing on and integrating literature on political trust and institutional legitimacy, psychological models of dependency and adaptive coping, patron-clientelism in Philippine political science, social exchange theory, and Sikolohiyang Pilipino's critique of essentialist cultural attribution, the paper proposes an interactional model in which distrust and reliance are understood as operating on separate evaluative tracks rather than as causally sequenced opposites. Reliance on government assistance is reframed as an adaptive-transactional response, in which taxation and civic compliance are experienced as contribution and assistance programs as a legitimately claimed return, such that perceived institutional failure intensifies rather than suppresses the claiming of benefits. The paper further argues that disposition and structural context are recursively linked, such that patterns popularly narrated as fixed cultural traits are better understood as the sedimented output of repeated adaptation to patron-clientelist, resource-scarce governance conditions. As a conceptual synthesis, the paper does not test this model empirically; rather, it offers a theoretically integrated alternative to the dependency-mentality narrative and recommends future qualitative research engaging directly with program beneficiaries to examine its applicability to lived experience. The analysis contributes to behavioral-social scholarship on citizen-state relations by relocating a frequently moralized cultural narrative within an evidence-grounded, anti-essentialist theoretical frame.

Keywords: *political trust, dependency narrative, patron-clientelism, social exchange theory, Sikolohiyang Pilipino, government dole-outs*

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1. Introduction

Filipino political discourse returns, with almost ritual regularity, to a single accusatory refrain: that ordinary citizens have become too dependent on government largesse, too quick to expect *ayuda*, too willing to trade political loyalty for a cash transfer. The accusation is rarely accompanied by an equally serious question — why would a citizenry that so consistently distrusts its government also so consistently rely on it? Surveys and public commentary alike record deep and often justified skepticism toward Philippine political institutions: perceptions of corruption, patronage, and self-interest run through both elite and popular discourse. Yet these same publics engage extensively with government assistance programs, from conditional cash transfers to emergency relief, and often measure the legitimacy of a given administration partly by the generosity or promptness of such support. The coexistence of distrust and dependence is not a contradiction to be explained away; it is a psychological and social pattern that deserves direct analytical attention.

This tension is frequently collapsed into a single, moralized narrative: that Filipinos possess a “dependency mentality,” a dispositional trait rooted in colonial history, personalistic culture, or an alleged national tendency toward

passivity. This framing has considerable cultural traction — it appears in editorials, in casual conversation, and occasionally in policy debate — but it does comparatively little analytical work. It treats what may be a rational, patterned response to institutional conditions as though it were a fixed trait of national character, and in doing so, forecloses a more useful question: under what psychological and social logic does reliance on a distrusted government make sense?

An alternative explanation, less culturally satisfying but arguably more analytically defensible, treats reliance on government assistance as a transactional and structurally conditioned behavior rather than a dispositional one. On this account, citizens who perceive their government as extractive — through taxation experienced as burdensome and returns experienced as inconsistent or captured by corruption — may reasonably treat direct assistance programs as a partial, tangible recovery of what is otherwise owed to them. Reliance, on this reading, is not evidence of psychological passivity but an expression of a reciprocity logic: if the state extracts, the state should also provide, and when it does provide, citizens are entitled to take what is offered regardless of their opinion of the institution providing it. This reframes the puzzle from “why do dependent people distrust government” to “how do rational, distrustful people relate to a government they nonetheless need.”

The difficulty, of course, is that these two explanations — dispositional dependency and transactional reciprocity — are not easily separated in practice, and their entanglement is precisely what gives the question its “chicken-and-egg” character. Does distrust produce a transactional stance toward government benefits, or does habitual reliance on government benefits produce a rationalized distrust that justifies continued reliance? Does the psychological experience of relying on a corrupt system generate resentment that hardens into cynicism, or does prior cultural conditioning toward dependency produce a citizenry primed to distrust institutions it nonetheless leans upon? The present paper does not claim to resolve this causal sequence empirically — no such resolution is possible from conceptual analysis alone — but it argues that the sequencing question may itself be a less productive frame than an interactional one, in which disposition and institutional context are understood as mutually reinforcing rather than as competing first causes.

This concern matters beyond academic curiosity. As government assistance programs such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) and related dole-out mechanisms remain central features of Philippine governance and electoral politics, understanding the psychological and social logic behind public engagement with such programs has direct implications for how these programs are designed, communicated, and evaluated — and for how citizens' relationships to the state are understood in scholarship rather than in moralized public commentary. Treating dependency as a fixed cultural trait risks stigmatizing recipients and obscuring the structural conditions — weak social protection systems, inconsistent public service delivery, entrenched patron-client political structures — that make transactional reliance a reasonable response rather than a character flaw.

Accordingly, this paper pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it examines how political trust, or its absence, functions psychologically as a mediating condition between citizens and the state, drawing on literature concerning institutional legitimacy and trust formation. Second, it critically evaluates the “dependency mentality” narrative against alternative explanatory frameworks grounded in social exchange theory, transactional politics, and patron-clientelism, with particular attention to Philippine-specific scholarship, including critical Filipino psychology (*Sikolohiyang Pilipino*) perspectives that have historically challenged essentialist cultural attributions. Third, it proposes an integrative conceptual reframing in which reliance on government assistance is understood not as a binary outcome of either disposition or structure, but as an adaptive psychological-social response that emerges from their interaction — offering a more analytically honest account of why distrust and dependence so persistently coexist in the Philippine political landscape.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Political Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Political trust functions in the literature not as a static attitude but as an ongoing psychological appraisal of institutional competence, fairness, and reliability. Classical formulations distinguish between diffuse trust — a generalized orientation toward the legitimacy of the political system — and specific trust, which tracks performance evaluations of particular institutions or officeholders (Easton, 1975). This distinction matters for the present inquiry because it allows for the possibility that citizens can hold low specific trust in government actors, particularly around

corruption, while retaining higher diffuse trust in the state's basic obligation to provide for its citizens. Institutional legitimacy theory further suggests that legitimacy is not solely a function of procedural fairness but also of substantive delivery — the state's demonstrated capacity to meet material needs (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Where procedural legitimacy is compromised by corruption perceptions, substantive delivery through direct assistance may become a compensatory basis for continued engagement, even amid skepticism.

This body of work complicates any simple equation of low trust with disengagement. Trust and reliance are not mirror opposites; a citizen may rationally calculate that engagement with a distrusted institution remains individually beneficial even as collective confidence in that institution declines. This tension is especially salient in contexts of weak institutionalization, where citizens' primary relationship to the state is mediated less by abstract civic identity and more by direct, tangible exchanges — a pattern with clear relevance to the Philippine case, where public evaluation of government is frequently anchored in the visibility and immediacy of assistance programs rather than in evaluations of governance quality per se.

2.2 Dependency, Learned Helplessness, and Psychological Adaptation

The “dependency mentality” narrative implicitly draws on psychological models of learned helplessness, in which repeated exposure to conditions of limited control produces passivity and diminished self-directed action (Seligman, 1972). Applied uncritically to welfare recipients, this model risks pathologizing rational resource-seeking as a deficit of agency. However, subsequent psychological literature has significantly qualified the original helplessness paradigm, distinguishing between genuine motivational deficits and adaptive strategies that appear passive but function as calculated responses to structurally limited options (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Under conditions of persistent institutional unreliability, reliance on available assistance may represent efficient allocation of effort rather than the erosion of agency itself.

This distinction is analytically important for the present paper's central argument. If reliance on government assistance is better characterized as adaptive coping — a strategic response to structural constraint — rather than as learned helplessness in the clinical sense, then the moralized “dependency” framing common in Philippine public discourse conflates two psychologically distinct phenomena. The literature on coping and resource conservation similarly suggests that individuals facing chronic resource insecurity engage in active, effortful strategies to preserve and acquire resources, including engagement with state assistance programs, which stands in contrast to the passivity implied by colloquial dependency narratives (Hobfoll, 1989). Read this way, sustained engagement with dole-out programs need not indicate diminished agency; it may reflect precisely the opposite — an active, rational strategy under constrained institutional conditions.

2.3 Patron-Clientelism and Transactional Politics in Philippine Governance

Philippine political scholarship has long identified patron-clientelism as a structuring feature of citizen-state relations, in which political support is exchanged for material benefit through personalized rather than institutional channels (Scott, 1972; Hutchcroft, 1998). This literature reframes reliance on government assistance not as a psychological trait but as a rational adaptation to a political system in which personalistic exchange has historically been a more reliable mechanism for securing benefit than impersonal bureaucratic entitlement. Within this framework, dole-out programs function less as neutral social protection instruments and more as extensions of a broader patronage logic, where the expectation of direct, visible return for political loyalty or civic compliance is deeply embedded in political culture.

This body of scholarship offers a direct structural counter-explanation to dispositional accounts of dependency. If citizens have been socialized within a political system where personalized exchange is the primary channel through which material needs are met, then engagement with dole-out programs reflects learned political competence — an accurate reading of how the system actually operates — rather than a psychological deficiency. Notably, this literature also suggests that patron-clientelism can coexist with, and even be reinforced by, low institutional trust: citizens may distrust the state as an abstract, rule-bound institution precisely because their lived experience of it has been mediated through personalistic, transactional relationships rather than impersonal entitlement.

2.4 Social Exchange Theory and Reciprocity Logic

Social exchange theory provides a formal behavioral framework for understanding the “taxpayer’s claim” logic embedded in public attitudes toward government benefit programs. Foundational exchange theory posits that social relationships, including those between citizens and institutions, are governed by norms of reciprocity in which perceived contribution generates an expectation of proportionate return (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). Applied to the citizen-state relationship, taxation and civic compliance constitute a form of contribution, and government assistance programs represent a corresponding, expected return; when that return is perceived as inadequate, delayed, or captured by corruption, citizens may intensify their claims on whatever direct benefits remain accessible, treating dole-outs as a partial, tangible recovery of an otherwise unfulfilled exchange.

This framework offers the clearest theoretical account of the paper’s central puzzle: reliance on a distrusted government is not a contradiction under exchange logic but a predictable consequence of it. Distrust, in this reading, does not suppress engagement with government benefits; it heightens the perceived legitimacy of claiming them, since the recipient regards the benefit as compensation owed rather than a favor granted. This reframes public reliance on assistance programs as an assertion of reciprocity rights rather than evidence of psychological or cultural dependency, and it directly bridges the trust literature (Section 2.1) and the structural patronage literature (Section 2.3) into a coherent behavioral logic.

2.5 Cultural Attribution vs. Structural Explanation in Filipino Psychology

Critical Filipino psychology, most notably the *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* tradition founded by Virgilio Enriquez, has long challenged the tendency of both colonial-era and contemporary commentary to attribute Filipino social behavior to fixed, often pejorative, national character traits rather than to the structural and historical conditions that produce them (Enriquez, 1975; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). This tradition explicitly critiques the practice of pathologizing culturally patterned behavior — including patterns of reliance, deference, or transactional engagement with authority — as inherent psychological deficits, arguing instead that such patterns must be read within their colonial, political, and economic context.

This literature is directly relevant to evaluating the “dependency mentality” narrative that motivates the present paper. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* scholarship provides both a methodological caution and a substantive alternative: rather than treating reliance on government dole-outs as evidence of an essential Filipino disposition, this tradition would locate the behavior within the structural conditions examined in the preceding sections — weak institutional trust, patron-clientelist political socialization, and reciprocity-based exchange expectations. Taken together with the preceding four themes, this body of work supplies the disciplinary warrant for the paper’s central reframing: that what is popularly narrated as a trait is more defensibly understood as a patterned, structurally conditioned, and psychologically rational response.

2.6 Synthesis of Literature

Read together, the five thematic strands converge on a single analytical conclusion: the coexistence of institutional distrust and reliance on government assistance is not a psychological anomaly but a predictable outcome of the interaction between trust dynamics, adaptive coping, structural political conditions, exchange norms, and culturally-situated behavior. The political trust literature (2.1) establishes that distrust and reliance are not opposites but can operate on separate tracks — diffuse legitimacy versus specific performance evaluation — allowing citizens to distrust government actors while still engaging its assistance mechanisms. The psychological literature on dependency and coping (2.2) reframes reliance as adaptive resource-seeking rather than helplessness, directly undermining the pathologizing premise of the “dependency mentality” narrative. The patron-clientelism literature (2.3) supplies the structural mechanism: citizens have been socialized into a political system where personalized, transactional exchange is often the most reliable route to material benefit, making reliance a form of learned political competence rather than a character flaw. Social exchange theory (2.4) formalizes this into a reciprocity logic — taxation as contribution, assistance as expected and legitimately claimed return — which directly explains why distrust can intensify rather than suppress the claiming of benefits. Finally, *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* scholarship (2.5) provides the disciplinary and historical warrant for rejecting essentialist cultural attribution altogether, insisting that such patterns be read structurally rather than as fixed national traits.

Across these themes, a consistent tension emerges between trait-based and structure-based explanatory logics, with the cumulative weight of the literature favoring structural and adaptive accounts over dispositional ones. However, the literature stops short of offering an integrated model of how these mechanisms interact dynamically over time — a gap the present paper is positioned to address.

2.7 Gaps in the Literature

Several gaps are evident. First, while trust, coping, patronage, and exchange literatures each offer partial explanations, few works integrate them into a single interactional framework capable of addressing the specific “chicken-and-egg” sequencing question this paper raises — whether distrust generates transactional reliance or habitual reliance generates rationalized distrust. Second, much of the trust and exchange literature is drawn from general or Western democratic contexts, with comparatively less theoretical work explicitly modeling how these dynamics operate under Philippine-specific conditions of entrenched patron-clientelism. Third, Sikolohiyang Pilipino's critique of essentialism, while foundational, has been applied more extensively to broader Filipino social traits (e.g., *hiya*, *utang na loob*, *pakikisama*) than specifically to contemporary attitudes toward state welfare and dole-out programs. Fourth, there is limited conceptual work distinguishing dispositional dependency from transactional reciprocity as empirically and theoretically separable constructs, which contributes to their persistent conflation in both scholarly and public discourse.

2.8 Contribution of the Present Paper

The present paper addresses these gaps by proposing an integrative conceptual model in which political trust, adaptive coping, patron-clientelist socialization, and reciprocity norms are treated not as competing explanations but as mutually reinforcing components of a single behavioral-social process specific to the Philippine context. Rather than resolving the “chicken-and-egg” sequencing question empirically — which lies beyond the scope of a conceptual paper — it reframes the question itself, arguing that disposition and structural context are recursively linked rather than sequentially prior to one another. In doing so, the paper extends Sikolohiyang Pilipino's anti-essentialist critique into the specific and currently under-theorized domain of state dole-out engagement, offering a more analytically defensible alternative to the popular “dependency mentality” narrative.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual analysis design, appropriate for scholarship that seeks to interrogate, reframe, and theoretically integrate existing explanatory constructs rather than generate or test findings from primary data. As a non-empirical, literature-based synthesis, the paper does not involve participants, fieldwork, or data collection procedures; its “data” consists of published theoretical and empirical literature drawn from political psychology, social-exchange theory, Philippine political science, and critical Filipino psychology (Sikolohiyang Pilipino).

The source orientation prioritizes peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical literature across five converging domains: institutional trust and legitimacy, psychological models of dependency and coping, patron-clientelism in Philippine political science, social exchange theory, and Sikolohiyang Pilipino scholarship on cultural attribution. Sources were selected for their relevance to the paper's central explanatory puzzle — the coexistence of institutional distrust and reliance on government assistance — rather than for topical proximity to Philippine politics alone; foundational theoretical works (e.g., on learned helplessness, social exchange, institutional legitimacy) were included where they supply constructs necessary for the paper's integrative argument, even where not Philippines-specific.

The inclusion logic favors literature that offers explanatory mechanisms — theoretical constructs capable of accounting for behavior — over descriptive or purely empirical studies reporting isolated findings without theoretical elaboration. Philippine-specific sources were prioritized where available to ground the analysis contextually; general theoretical literature was included where it supplies constructs that Philippine-specific scholarship has not yet fully theorized in relation to state dole-out engagement specifically (identified as a gap in Section 2.7).

The thematic grouping logic organizes the literature along five domains that move from the psychological (trust, coping) to the structural (patronage, exchange) to the disciplinary-critical (cultural attribution), mirroring the paper's overall argumentative arc: from establishing that distrust and reliance are not contradictory, through explaining the

structural mechanisms that make reliance rational, to grounding the argument's rejection of essentialism in an established critical tradition.

The interpretive framework applied across the literature is integrative and dialectical rather than adjudicative: rather than treating trust-based, structural, and exchange-based explanations as competing hypotheses to be ranked, the paper treats them as complementary mechanisms operating at different levels of analysis (psychological, political-structural, and normative-relational, respectively), which are then synthesized into a single interactional model in the Analytical Synthesis section.

Analytical criteria for evaluating and integrating the literature include: (a) explanatory adequacy — whether a given construct plausibly accounts for the coexistence of distrust and reliance; (b) contextual fit — whether the construct is applicable to, or has been applied within, Philippine governance conditions; and (c) compatibility with an anti-essentialist framing, consistent with the paper's explicit rejection of trait-based cultural explanation.

This design carries clear limitations. As a conceptual paper, it does not empirically test the proposed interactional model, and its claims are therefore theoretical rather than demonstrated. It relies on secondary literature rather than direct engagement with Filipino citizens' own accounts of their attitudes toward government assistance, which constrains its ability to capture lived psychological nuance. The paper's structural and psychological literatures are drawn substantially from contexts outside the Philippines, and while applied carefully, this raises questions of contextual transferability that future qualitative research — engaging directly with 4Ps beneficiaries or comparable populations — would be well positioned to address.

4. Analytical Synthesis

The literature reviewed in Section 2 converges on a shared insight that is nonetheless left theoretically underdeveloped: distrust and reliance are not sequential opposites but co-occurring products of a single behavioral-social logic. This section develops that insight into an integrated interactional model, addressing the paper's central puzzle directly — is Filipino reliance on government dole-outs a matter of disposition, or a rational response to a distrusted but extractive state?

4.1 Reframing the Chicken-and-Egg Question

The sequencing question, as popularly posed, assumes that either disposition precedes and produces reliance, or reliance precedes and produces a rationalized distrust. Both framings share an unexamined premise: that disposition and structural context are analytically separable, temporally ordered causes. The literature reviewed here suggests otherwise. Political trust operates on dual tracks — diffuse and specific (Section 2.1) — meaning a citizen can simultaneously hold negative evaluations of government performance and a stable expectation that the state owes material return for civic contribution. This dual-track structure removes the need for sequencing altogether: distrust of institutional conduct and reliance on institutional provision are not contradictory states requiring causal ordering, because they operate at different evaluative levels from the outset. The “chicken-and-egg” framing, in other words, may be a category error — it treats two co-occurring but analytically distinct attitudes as though they were a single variable requiring a single causal origin.

Recent Philippine evidence offers a useful contemporary parallel to this dual-track interpretation. In a 2026 study of 483 respondents from Calamba, Santa Rosa, and Biñan, Lantin-Magana et al. found government trust to be the lowest-rated domain ($M = 3.85$) even while risk tolerance and attitudes toward capital markets were comparatively favorable (Lantin-Magana et al., 2026). The behavioral domain is investment rather than public assistance, but the pattern is theoretically instructive: low confidence in government can coexist with active, purposive engagement rather than producing generalized withdrawal. This strengthens the argument that institutional evaluation and behavior toward available benefits or opportunities should not be collapsed into a single trust-dependent continuum.

More direct cash-transfer research strengthens the case for treating trust and participation as mutually shaping rather than as a one-way sequence. In south-central Somalia, transfers delivered through state institutions increased perceptions of local-government legitimacy and trust even though the resources were externally funded (Van Den Boogaard et al., 2023). Evidence from Ghana similarly indicates that participation in the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty program could deepen beneficiaries' attachment to the state, while also raising concerns about whether

recipients felt fully free to criticize government (Botchwey & Noyoo, 2025). In Pakistan, the political effects of cash transfers depended on relative deprivation: when such comparisons were made salient, recipients became more supportive of government while excluded non-recipients became more dissatisfied (Kosec & Mo, 2023). These findings make a simple trust-first explanation difficult to sustain because program participation, inclusion, and the meaning attached to receiving assistance can themselves reshape political evaluations.

4.2 The Adaptive-Transactional Synthesis

Sections 2.2 through 2.4 supply the mechanism by which this dual-track structure becomes behaviorally active. Adaptive coping theory (2.2) establishes that reliance on available assistance under conditions of constrained agency reflects strategic resource-seeking rather than passivity. Patron-clientelist political socialization (2.3) establishes that Filipino citizens have historically operated within a system where personalized, transactional exchange — rather than impersonal bureaucratic entitlement — has been the more reliable channel for securing material benefit. Social exchange theory (2.4) then formalizes the resulting behavior: taxation and civic compliance are experienced as contribution, and assistance programs as a legitimately claimed return, such that perceived inadequacy or corruption in that return does not suppress the claim but intensifies it, since the benefit is understood as compensation owed rather than favor granted.

Integrated, these three mechanisms describe what might be termed an adaptive-transactional stance: citizens learn, through sustained exposure to a resource-scarce and personalistic political system, that direct claims on visible government benefit are both the most rational and the most culturally legible way to secure return on civic contribution — independent of, and indeed partly because of, low confidence in the institution's broader integrity.

Recent Philippine work on adaptation also cautions against equating reliance under constraint with passivity. Adame (2026), studying helping professionals, reported strong positive associations between adversity quotient, resilience, and professional effectiveness, indicating that coping under adverse conditions can involve ownership, persistence, and goal-directed functioning. At a different level of analysis, Quinto and Atento (2025) showed that macroeconomic gains do not automatically translate into equitable social outcomes when supportive systems are weak, and they explicitly identified social protection as part of the policy response. These adjacent findings reinforce the adaptive-transactional interpretation: behavior must be read together with both the actor's coping capacities and the resource environment in which choices are made.

4.3 Disposition and Structure as Recursively Linked

Rather than resolving the sequencing question, this synthesis argues that disposition and structure are recursively linked: repeated exposure to patron-clientelist, low-accountability governance conditions (structure) produces adaptive transactional habits of engagement with the state (disposition-like pattern), which are then reproduced and reinforced through continued participation in those same structural conditions. What appears, cross-sectionally, as a stable “trait” — reflexive reliance on dole-outs — is better understood as the sedimented output of a recursive structure-behavior loop rather than as either a prior cause or a downstream effect. This reframing does not deny that reliance-oriented attitudes exist and persist; it denies only that they originate from an essential national disposition rather than from repeated, rational adaptation to recurring institutional conditions.

Evidence from institutional and economic contexts further supports this recursive structure-behavior reading. Atento (2026) found substantial between-country heterogeneity in formal business entry across ASEAN and concluded that structural conditions were more informative than several short-run macroeconomic indicators, while Menez and Atento (2026) reported a positive association between a multidimensional measure of women's empowerment - including institutional inclusion - and formal enterprise dynamism in the Philippines. Neither study addresses welfare reliance directly, but both illustrate a common analytical principle: recurring behavior is embedded in opportunity structures, institutional conditions, and accumulated constraints. What looks like stable disposition at one point in time may therefore partly reflect repeated adaptation to the environment that makes some courses of action more feasible than others.

4.4 The Anti-Essentialist Corrective

Sikolohiyang Pilipino scholarship (2.5) supplies the disciplinary basis for insisting that this recursive pattern not be re-essentialized into a trait-based narrative once it stabilizes into an observable behavioral regularity. The risk, made explicit by this literature, is that a structurally produced pattern — however consistent across time or population — becomes culturally narrated as an inherent characteristic, obscuring the institutional conditions that produced and continue to reproduce it. Applying this caution to the present analysis, the paper's model treats “reliance on government” as a behavioral regularity with an identifiable structural etiology, not as evidence of an underlying Filipino disposition toward dependency.

Recent Philippine governance scholarship provides an additional anti-essentialist parallel. Atento (2025) treats credibility as an endogenous product of governance integrity, accountability, institutional stability, and resilience rather than as a fixed reputational attribute. Applied cautiously to citizen-state relations, the same logic suggests that distrust should be analyzed as a response to institutional performance and governance conditions, not as evidence of an immutable cultural orientation. This places responsibility for recurring distrust partly within the quality and consistency of the institutional environment itself.

4.5 Implications for the 4Ps and Similar Programs

Applied to contemporary dole-out mechanisms such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program, this model suggests that program uptake and public support should not be read as indicators of induced passivity, nor should declining trust in the administering government be expected to reduce demand for or engagement with such programs. If anything, the adaptive-transactional model predicts the opposite: under conditions of heightened corruption perception, claims on direct, visible assistance may intensify precisely because such assistance is treated as the most tangible and least corruptible form of return available to ordinary citizens navigating an otherwise opaque and distrusted system.

From a policy perspective, this distinction matters because social assistance operates within broader systems that convert public resources into household-level welfare. Quinto and Atento (2025) argue that macroeconomic strength is insufficient for equitable outcomes when social supports are weak, explicitly calling attention to social protection as a mechanism for translating aggregate resources into human welfare. Under the present model, the relevant evaluative question is therefore not simply whether recipients continue to claim 4Ps benefits, but whether the institutional environment offers credible, rule-based, and accessible pathways through which citizens can convert formal membership in the polity into material security. Program uptake alone cannot adjudicate between passivity and rational adaptation.

The newer cash-transfer literature also indicates that the institutional design of assistance conditions whether participation reinforces legitimacy or produces skepticism. In Chad, selective and insufficiently transparent inclusion generated perceptions of unfairness and corruption among those left outside the program, with consequences for social cohesion (Della Guardia et al., 2022). In Zambia, perceived partisan bias surrounding emergency cash transfers was linked to implementation weaknesses and institutional fragility, which in turn undermined program legitimacy (Siachiwena et al., 2025). These studies suggest that the relevant psychological object is not government assistance in the abstract, but the fairness, transparency, and political neutrality with which eligibility and distribution are experienced.

Operational reliability matters as well. In Zimbabwe, delayed disbursements, benefits misaligned with household needs, and weak grievance mechanisms impaired the effectiveness of government-led social assistance, although the study did not isolate political trust as an independent predictor of uptake (Ncube & Murray, 2024). Experimental evidence on aid modality further shows that take-up can depend on both what is offered and who offers it: government-provided cash and food assistance generated similar take-up, whereas cash supplied by charitable providers was less readily accepted in the comparative settings examined by Kassirer et al. (2024). For the 4Ps, this means that continued enrollment or benefit claiming should not be interpreted solely through a dispositional lens; delivery architecture, procedural fairness, reliability, and institutional source can all shape the behavioral meaning of participation.

5. Discussion of Findings and Implications

The analytical synthesis developed in Section 4 carries implications that extend beyond resolving an academic puzzle; it bears on how psychology and social analysis should approach the broader relationship between Filipino citizens and the state. Read collectively, the reframing offered here suggests that the popular “dependency mentality” narrative performs a kind of psychological misattribution — it locates the cause of a structurally produced behavioral pattern within the individual or cultural group, rather than within the recurring institutional conditions that generate and sustain it. This has direct relevance for social psychology's broader concern with attribution error: the tendency to explain behavior through dispositional rather than situational factors is a well-established pattern in lay reasoning, and the Filipino dependency narrative may be read as a culturally specific instance of this general tendency, applied at the level of a national population rather than an individual.

The risk of dispositional over-attribution is not merely theoretical. Lantin-Magana et al. (2026) provide contemporary Philippine evidence that weaker government trust can coexist with favorable behavioral orientations, while Atento (2025) identifies governance integrity, control of corruption, accountability, and institutional stability as central components of the credibility framework. Read together, these studies caution against treating distrust as a free-floating personal attitude detached from institutional experience. They are more consistent with a situational reading in which citizens evaluate the state through the quality of governance they encounter while continuing to act instrumentally within the opportunities the state makes available.

The recent cash-transfer evidence introduces an important qualification to any strong causal claim about distrust producing reliance. Across the studies summarized above, the more commonly tested pathway runs from program participation and implementation experience toward political trust, legitimacy, or support, rather than from pre-existing low trust toward subsequent uptake. Van Den Boogaard et al. (2023), Botchwey and Noyoo (2025), and Kosec and Mo (2023) therefore support the paper's recursive formulation more strongly than a unidirectional one: receiving assistance, being excluded from it, or interpreting its allocation relative to others can alter political evaluations after participation decisions have already occurred. The conceptual model is consequently best read as bidirectional and context-dependent, with trust both entering and emerging from citizen-state exchange.

For identity and selfhood, the implications are significant. A citizenry repeatedly characterized, in public discourse and occasionally in scholarship, as dispositionally dependent may internalize this framing in ways that shape self-perception independent of its empirical accuracy — a dynamic worth flagging even though testing it lies beyond this paper's conceptual scope. Reframing reliance as adaptive and transactional rather than as a character deficit carries a corrective function: it relocates the moral weight of the behavior away from the individual recipient and toward the institutional conditions that make such adaptation reasonable in the first place.

For coping and agency, the adaptive-transactional model developed here pushes back against a passive reading of welfare engagement. Citizens who claim government assistance amid low institutional trust are not, on this account, failing to exercise agency; they are exercising it within a constrained field of options, selecting the most reliable available mechanism — direct, visible material transfer — for securing return on civic contribution. This reading aligns with resource conservation and adaptive coping literatures (Section 2.2) that treat active resource-seeking under constraint as a form of competence rather than its absence.

Agency under constraint is likewise better understood as relational rather than purely intrapsychic. Adame's (2026) findings on adversity quotient and resilience indicate, in an adjacent Philippine behavioral domain, that persistence and adaptation can remain strong even under demanding conditions. At the structural level, Menez and Atento (2026) show that empowerment and institutional inclusion are associated with formal enterprise dynamism, and Atento (2026) shows that persistent country-level conditions account for substantial differences in formal business entry across ASEAN. The implication for social assistance is not that these findings prove welfare behavior, but that agency is exercised through institutional opportunity sets; citizens can be active strategists even when the choices available to them are constrained.

For ethics as lived experience, the model complicates any straightforward moral evaluation of dole-out engagement as either virtuous self-reliance forgone or improper extraction from the state. Instead, it positions such engagement within a reciprocity ethic already operative in citizens' own reasoning: assistance is claimed because it is understood, however implicitly, as compensation legitimately owed rather than as a favor accepted. Evaluating this

behavior against an external standard of civic virtue that ignores this internal reciprocity logic risks moralizing what is, within the citizen's own frame, a coherent ethical claim.

The reciprocity argument also has a distributive-policy counterpart. Quinto and Atento (2025) conclude that economic strength does not automatically generate equitable human outcomes and emphasize social protection as part of the institutional mechanism by which aggregate resources are translated into welfare. That framing is compatible with the present paper's claim that assistance may be experienced as a legitimate social return rather than as unilateral generosity. It shifts ethical evaluation away from whether recipients "deserve" assistance because they are sufficiently self-reliant and toward whether public institutions discharge distributive obligations in a transparent and sustainable manner.

This also sharpens the ethical and institutional implications of the analysis. If targeting opacity, perceived political bias, unreliable disbursement, or weak grievance processes can erode legitimacy (Della Guardia et al., 2022; Ncube & Murray, 2024; Siachiwena et al., 2025), then distrust among beneficiaries or non-beneficiaries cannot be treated simply as an antecedent personal attitude. It may partly be an evaluative response to the design and administration of the program itself. Conversely, when transfers are delivered through institutions in ways that make the state visible as a provider, participation can strengthen perceived legitimacy (Van Den Boogaard et al., 2023). The policy implication is that social protection programs do more than transfer resources: their selection rules, delivery channels, grievance systems, and continuity also communicate whether the state is fair, competent, and responsive.

Theoretically, this paper's contribution lies less in generating new constructs than in demonstrating that existing constructs — dual-track trust, adaptive coping, patron-clientelism, social exchange, and anti-essentialist critique — cohere into a single interactional account when read together, where the literature has largely treated them in isolation. This theoretical integration itself constitutes the paper's central offering to IJBeSA's concern with human response to institutional and social conditions.

Implementation research further underscores the danger of psychologizing behavior that may be capacity-driven. Garcia and Atento (2026), examining PhilHealth Benchbook II implementation in a tertiary hospital, found resource constraints to be the most frequently reported barrier, rather than attitudinal resistance. The setting and actors differ from 4Ps beneficiaries, so the finding should be treated as a contextual bridge rather than direct evidence. Even so, it illustrates the broader multi-level principle advanced here: observable patterns of participation, compliance, or reliance can arise from institutional design and resource conditions before they reveal anything definitive about disposition.

The boundaries of what can be concluded here are important to state plainly. This is a conceptual synthesis, not an empirical demonstration; the interactional model proposed is theoretically coherent and consistent with the reviewed literature, but it has not been tested against primary data from Filipino citizens themselves. The paper cannot determine, from existing literature alone, the relative strength of each mechanism (trust, coping, patronage, exchange) in producing observed reliance patterns, nor can it rule out that dispositional factors — distinct from the essentialist "trait" framing critiqued here — play some role alongside structural ones. These are boundaries the paper accepts deliberately, consistent with its stated conceptual scope, rather than gaps to be resolved through overclaiming.

Accordingly, the present paper should not claim that lower political trust has been demonstrated to increase or decrease 4Ps uptake. The current evidence base does not isolate that relationship cleanly among already-enrolled cash-transfer recipients. A stronger empirical test would measure baseline institutional trust separately from program uptake or continuity, while also accounting for perceived targeting fairness, relative deprivation, delivery reliability, grievance access, and the institutional channel through which assistance is received. Such a design would allow the proposed adaptive-transactional model to distinguish whether distrust operates as an antecedent, an outcome, a moderator, or some combination of all three.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper set out to address a recurring and often moralized puzzle in Philippine public discourse: how a citizenry that persistently distrusts its government can simultaneously, and often intensively, rely on that same government for material assistance. Rather than accepting the popular "dependency mentality" narrative — which locates this pattern in a fixed Filipino disposition — the paper has argued, through an integrative reading of political

trust, adaptive coping, patron-clientelism, social exchange theory, and Sikolohiyang Pilipino's anti-essentialist critique, that reliance on government dole-outs is better understood as an adaptive-transactional response to recurring structural conditions rather than as evidence of cultural or psychological passivity. The apparent chicken-and-egg sequencing between distrust and dependency dissolves once the two are recognized as operating on separate evaluative tracks, recursively reinforced through repeated engagement with a personalistic, resource-scarce political system rather than causally prior to one another.

The paper's strongest supported insight is that distrust and reliance are not analytically contradictory and therefore do not require causal sequencing to be explained; their coexistence is adequately accounted for by existing constructs in political trust and social exchange literatures once those constructs are read together rather than separately. A second well-supported insight is that structural and adaptive explanations carry greater analytical weight in the reviewed literature than dispositional ones, consistent with Sikolohiyang Pilipino's longstanding critique of essentialist cultural attribution. These conclusions are offered with appropriate modesty: they represent a theoretically coherent synthesis of existing scholarship, not an empirically demonstrated causal account.

For research, the paper recommends future qualitative inquiry — engaging directly with 4Ps beneficiaries or comparable recipient populations — to examine whether the adaptive-transactional framing proposed here is recognizable in citizens' own accounts of their reasoning, and to assess the relative salience of trust, coping, patronage, and exchange logics in lived experience rather than in theoretical inference alone. Comparative research across other patron-clientelist political systems would further help establish whether this interactional model generalizes beyond the Philippine case or reflects context-specific dynamics.

For practice, program designers and communicators involved in social protection schemes such as the 4Ps may benefit from recognizing that public engagement with such programs is not evidence of induced passivity, and that framing recipients through a dependency lens risks both stigmatization and analytical error. Communication strategies acknowledging the reciprocity logic underlying public expectations — rather than treating assistance as unilateral state generosity — may more accurately reflect, and more constructively engage, the psychological and social reasoning citizens already bring to these programs.

For scholarly and public reflection more broadly, this paper recommends caution against reflexively narrating structurally produced behavioral patterns as fixed cultural traits, a caution with relevance well beyond the specific case of government dole-outs. The recursive model proposed here suggests that what looks, at any given moment, like a stable disposition may in fact be an ongoing product of institutional conditions — a distinction with consequences for how such patterns are studied, discussed, and addressed.

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