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Government Social Workers Fight Virus and Public Criticism: The Implementation of Social Amelioration Program During Covid-19 Pandemic in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper talks about the issues surrounding the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) by the Philippine government and how the social workers are caught between looking after themselves in this pandemic, being vigilant against criticisms and making credible decisions on the eligibility of people who are going to avail SAP. In critically analysing the issues and power relations, the paper present two idea: (a) analysing the perspectives of the government and citizens on deciding who are eligible beneficiaries of the program using the deservingness theory which best describes the perspectives in play in the decision making and how these perspectives create tension in the implementation of the program; and (b) analysing the power perspectives of the social worker, using Michel Foucault's ideas of power, which help social worker maintain professionalism, remain optimistic about their profession, make sound judgements amidst all the noises of the bureaucracy, public doubts, criticism and possible burn out.

Keywords: social worker; deservingness; foucauldian perspective; social amelioration program

Introduction

It is the first time in the history of the 21st century that every citizens of the world have been greatly affected by a single unpleasant event and it is due to the pandemic corona virus or what is commonly known as Covid-19. Hundreds of thousands have been infected and millions of lives have been derailed from their regular activities. As we are looking at the global perspective, we also need to act locally as we adapt strategies from them (Briggs, 2020, pp. 1). Government across the globe tried to mitigate to effects of the virus including its economic and employment consequences.

In the Philippines, the government tries to give as much financial support it can to vulnerable citizens. The president called for the approval of emergency power from congress and the signing of approved budget of 2.8 billion Philippine pesos for "Social Amelioration Program" or SAP. This fund can only accommodate a few million Filipinos of the 108.5 million total population of the country. From a third world country's context, limited funds, especially during crisis, will cause both good and bad results since everyone would want to have access to that resources (Silva & Costa, 2019). With most of the fund for SAP going to the Department of

Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), it is up to their field workers and social workers to conduct the validation of the beneficiaries to make sure that those who are intended by the program to receive the grant will be able to access it and use it properly. And that is when the conflicts arise.

Social workers are now in a very difficult spot where they need to perform their duty amidst this pandemic and to face the criticisms of the public who are questioning the process of the validation and grant releases and basically their authority to make decisions who qualifies or not based on the tools used by the government. This paper tries to explain the varying perspectives of the service users and how social workers maintain status quo and professionalism despite power relations between them and the service users using Michel Foucault's theory of Power.

The deservingness theory, amongst other theories, will help to understand the point of view of the government and the citizen which the latter utilises to help during this pandemic. Although it can give us idea of perspectives in play, each of these subjects are free to agree and disagree on their stand on deservingness and it is still the decision of who is in position which will prevail.

The Foucauldian perspective on power gives better understanding on how social workers can discern during the assessment of SAP beneficiaries through their governmentality. The concepts of discipline and pastoral power in this perspective is also applicable in the context of the practice of social work in the Philippines that is why Foucauldian perspective of power is best to explain their situation.

This paper also gives implications to social work practice and recommendations which will help social workers to maintain governmentality and their passion to practice social work despite criticisms. Finally, the paper draws the inference by focusing on which areas on acknowledging the normalising power and governmentality as stronger than restricting power and that we should always exercise this better in taking course of actions in our daily lives.

Issues of misinformation, deservingness and distrust to program implementers

The SAP is intended for the vulnerable citizens who cannot work and have been financially affected following the lockdown due to pandemic (Department of Social Welfare & Development, 2020). Since they cannot go to work, operate business and do entrepreneurship, some have been forced to leave their work because companies are not supporting or capable of implementing the work from home scheme. But with a given amount of fund, it is only natural for the government to resort to the process of selecting who they deemed eligible based on a set standard. This is one major blow to the country's labour economy and to the workers themselves. Unlike the Danish Flexicurity model where workers are given necessary support as a result of the combination of social justice and economic efficiency (Jensen, 2017), the labour market and economy in the Philippines is in shambles because they are not prepared to deal to this kind of emergency. A lot of misinformation were misleading the public and they spread like wildfire making people angry to both the recipients of the grants and most especially the social workers doing the leg work in this time of crisis. The public are not keen on validating the source of the news on social media nor they are curious enough to check the accuracy of what they read and as this happens the boundaries between expert authority and quasi-proficiency are increasingly blurring in the social diffusion of information (Seymour et. al., 2015).

When the actual guidelines were released, the government opted to go for the validation process before giving the grant to its citizens. Which is not accepted by some because they believed the information on social media. The working class of the society were furious when they realized that the SAP are aimed towards those who are not working prior to the lockdown since they are assessed by the government to be the most economically affected because they have no means to save or be prepared for this kind of situation. The working class has been expressing their disappointment especially that they claim that they are the backbone of the Philippine economy and that they deserve to receive support from the government compared to those who have no work taxes.

Since they cannot get to the national government to express their dismay, the call on to the social workers doing the validation and the service users who are given the assistance. They have been accusing the DSWD of corruption. Social workers on the field are the ones who are experiencing most of the negative comments of the public. While there has been no official document released by the Philippine Association of Social Workers, Inc. (PASWI), the social workers tend to each other on helping each other and giving support from all their experiences on the field. It is possible that social workers will feel burn out due the risk of going to field and of course the distrust of the public in the implementation of SAP. They are now battling two fronts of the battle and they are always keen in maintaining professionalism.

Analysing Government and Citizens' Perspective on Deservingness

When it comes to determining the eligibility of the service user to a certain program or service, it is only natural for any government or institution to assess if they are qualified for the program and or ask if they need help that they can offer with their resources. On a higher level of analysis, that criteria are set based on which area of deservingness the program formulator is looking at in crafting and implementing their programs and services. Deservingness opinions are assumed to be important predictors of support for welfare arrangements (Meuleman et al., 2020). To be able to understand the stand of the government in providing help to the poor and vulnerable citizens and the reasons for the disappointment of the middle class and working group of the society, we will dig deeper using the theory of deservingness. While it is a challenge to draw the line between the needy to those who are not and to determine whether the needy themselves are to blame for their predicament (Rothstein, 1998), the deservingness theory gives us understanding on how politicians and program drafting bodies create interventions and explains how the public may respond to this. The redistributive principles of equity and the need are central to providing rationale for unequal distribution and targeting welfare to specific group (Reeskens & Oorschot, 2013). And these principles are embedded in the five deservingness criteria: control, need, identity, attitude and reciprocity.

In understanding the Philippine governments deservingness criteria on the implementation of SAP, we will investigate the criteria of control and need. Since people who are poor and do not have work prior to the implementation of the lockdown will probably suffer hunger, which they have right not to die from therefore needs help (Fleischacker, 2004), people are more willing to help them because of the intensity of the need that they are facing (Cook, 1979). The working class on the other hand are presumed to have continuous work and thus salary from work from home scheme. This is even though not all companies offered this mode of working. Also comes with salary is the ability to buy your own basic needs such as food, water and medicine. The second criteria to consider is the control. Which can be caused by disability resulting to lack of control to adjust to and improve the situation (De Swaan, 1988). Again, the poor, as understood by the government are those who may have disability and frail health but because of their financial difficulty are not able to avail medicine or visit the doctor, which in the Philippine

context are not free, make them more prone to the virus and therefore needs to be helped especially to fight the Covid-19. The working class, on the other hand, are understood to have insurances and medical health support from their companies and that they can visit doctor and buy medicine.

Looking at the perspective of the working class on the other hand, they insist to qualify for the SAP by the virtue of their contribution to the society particularly pertaining to their income taxes. This can be understood by the criteria of reciprocity of the deservingness theory. In social policy, reciprocity underlies social insurance schemes that protect people from social risks such as unemployment and sickness (Reeskens & Oorschot, 2013). The working class are firm in their understanding of this kind of scheme because like social policy contributions, their taxes should benefit them as well in time of crisis and they cannot grasp the idea of giving it to those who have little contribution to the economy of the country. Their perspective is that they should be the one reaping the harvest of their taxes since they work for it. The deeper conception of this idea is the principle who has more contributions should be helped in return during emergencies (Oorschot, 2000).

One can say that each view is valid on its own but as the government with little funds, it must stand to its decisions and let the field workers deal the direct attacks on the program. They must believe in the ability of the social workers to justify using the tool if the recipients of SAP are deserving or not based on the criteria they have set.

Deservingness theory takes the principles of redistributive justice as a point of departure but adds two new angles. First, rather than formulating normative theories of justice, deservingness theory investigates how the general population uses justice principles to distinguish the deserving from the non-deserving. Second, deservingness theory provides a further elaboration of arguments that people may use to challenge the principle of equality and target solidarity towards specific groups (Clasen & Van Oorschot, 2002).

That is why Laenen et al. (2019) argues that we need more research on this to be able better understand the phenomenon surrounding deservingness in the delivery of social welfare. But still, as of now, these contradicting views of deservingness is a place where you do not want to be caught as a person especially if you are a social worker who are following the guidelines handed to you by the organisation you are working with, which in this case is the government. The dilemma of doing your job, the doubts of the people you serve and your own personal judgement of the situation of each family you assess are difficult to weight in. But somehow, social workers are still able to perform their duties and provide service to service users in the best of their ability and professional judgement.

Analysing Foucauldian Power Relation Perspective in Social Work Practice

While human subject is placed in relations of productions and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex (Foucault, 1982, pp. 778). Despite this complex power relations, social workers during the implementation of SAP are acting upon not only on the power of bureaucracy, politics and negative comments of the public but on a much higher but less evident power of doing what is right despite all the outside noises. And that is what is keeping them in working professionally amidst all criticisms and the expectation of the black and white guidelines. This kind of power is what Foucault (1982) describes as the actions

of those who are free. And this freedom to govern one's own action is described by Foucault (1978) as governmentality.

In the subjectification of the social workers, they can be referred to as the one who tied to their own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge (Foucault, 1978). It is in recognition that power within a person is cultivated, created and produced (Foucault, 1978) through discipline or pastoral power. Either of the two sources, it is understood that the power created and generated are not destructive or negative in whatever aspect but positive in specific sense of being productive that connects human beings and institutions to a form of knowledge. This knowledge directs the course of actions or governmentality of individuals through their freewill (Foucault, 1978) and without imposition of outside authority.

Further analysing the root of discipline of the social workers, we look at the academic and professional principles and ethics that form the practice of profession. These principles, ethics and academic knowledge are common in the field of social work throughout the world. Although they could be applied in different contexts (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019). They have unison understanding of what is wrong and what is right (MacDermott, 2019). And despite having professional bodies to look for mis-practice, they are present as sanction mechanisms and social workers' governmentality still prevails in their courses of actions.

Foucault (1978) also mentioned that pastoral power is also a good source of how people practice governmentality over their actions. While discipline focuses on the body as main object, the pastoral power caters the mind, thoughts and beliefs of the human subject (Foucault, 1978). And pastoral power can be very evident in the social work practice in the Philippines especially that the country home to the largest Catholic faith in Southeast Asia and second to the entire continent, the teachings of the church shape the practice of the profession. Not only that, but a significant number of schools of social work in the Philippines are catholic institutions. Although the teachings of the church and the views of the profession on certain issues do not always agree, the practice of both faith and the profession acknowledges human rights and justice. And this governs the way social workers perform their duties.

It can be said that with these ideas and concepts established, the Foucauldian perspective of power is dominant in the practice of social work in the Philippines especially during this time of crisis. Despite the criticisms, social workers govern themselves in a way that is in accordance to their belief and principles. They understand that all the noises from the outside are to be considered but it should not affect on how just they judge on the eligibility of the beneficiaries not it should be a reason for them to decide if someone criticising them is not deserving to receive the grant. The ability to become and maintain just in time of a difficult situation is a characteristic that Foucault emphasizes in his idea of power. This governmentality, although common to all, are not much appreciated since we have been looking power at a different, and sometimes negative, aspect.

Foucault (1978) also describes this kind of power as normalising power which is a contradictory to the repressive power which limits our actions. In this belief, we understand that regardless of the presence of law or rules, people will still do what is right. And that the repressive power as represented by sanctions are just there when we failed to do what is normal for us to do. We can connect this notion to the idea of inherent worth and goodness which is a major principle in social work. Therefor acknowledging true nature as good and capable of doing good lays the foundation of a good practice of social work. Yes, there could be differences in how we see things but the way we handle them should always be done in the best interest of the citizens. Keeping in mind this idea of power, social worker maintain optimism in their dealing with the

service users during the validation process of SAP. And this should always be at the core of any helping profession.

Implications to Social Work Practice and Recommendations

As practitioner who have personal contact with service user's conflicts are unavoidable since interaction and communication are causes and resolutions to conflicts (Ellis, 2018). But the profession has endured so many criticisms in the past and it remained resilient that it is understandable for social workers to feel burn out and question their own credibility as professionals. With the understanding of the Foucauldian perspective of power, the just and sound judgement during time of crisis remained a major catalyst in maintaining dignity of the work and the effectivity of the services offered to the service users. Though, social workers still need to further understand the silent power in play, the normalising power. In order to uplift the dignity of the practice of profession, social workers will not only need to support one another but they will be needing support from their organisation and the professional group that they belong to. Maintaining a sound judgement while being cautious of your personal and mental health is no easy job. That is why as much as possible, the government should give them credit for their contribution, defend them from all negative accusations from events beyond their control, and release official statements denouncing the spread of misinformation and criticism to government social workers and field workers in general.

After all these, all frontline workers should also be given enough time to rest and spend time to take care of their mental health. This would provide social workers and field workers alike, a new perspective in the future task. After all, they are humans as well and they need some time to take care of themselves with necessary support. The normalising power or the governmentality of social workers over their actions are evident, but we do not want to make them exhausted that they are overwhelmed by so much restraining power around them that it affects their capacity to act on their accord and make good decisions. Organisations better look after their social workers and provide them as much support as they need, both medical, emotional and psychological.

Conclusion

We have seen the power of governmentality which helps not only to maintain professionalism and avoid wrong decisions but also to keep social workers in the sound mind in doing their tasks. The greater challenge for all of us is to acknowledge that normalising power and governmentality in our daily lives. And although it is might be invisible (Foucault, 1978), it is evident in our actions and when we bring it to consciousness, it can do more in maintaining good decisions, optimism, and professionalism. Acknowledging this view of power is stronger than restraining power, which we connote what real power is, gives us confidence that we can do better with our freewill than being afraid of the sanctions of doing what is sanctioned.

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