

MSSW Community Extension Program: Impact on Social Workers Working with Drug Reformists

HELEN L. QUERUBIN & NIKKI A. CLARION

Davao City, Philippines

ABSTRACT: This phenomenological study explores the impact of Social Work Community Extension services on drug reformists through semi-structured interviews with five participants. The study addresses three main research questions pertaining to the unique experiences and challenges of working with drug reformists, their coping strategies in dealing with this population, and the insights gained from handling drug reformists. The Focus Group discussion revealed several themes, including motivation and work, the impact of training on helpfulness, knowledge and understanding, and shared experiences. Additionally, short-term impacts included knowledge expansion, skill development, and practical application. Furthermore, additional themes emerged during the analysis, such as preparation and client management, unexpected and surprising situations, time management and scheduling, challenges, reactions, and responses. Finally, themes related to insights encompass empathy, non-judgment, continuous learning, self-sufficiency and independence, responsibility and service, challenges and consequences, and professional competence. The study's implications are significant for the social work profession in addressing the challenges of handling drug reformists. The contribution to society lies in enhancing social workers' abilities to handle drug reformists, potentially breaking the cycle of drug abuse and addiction and improving overall societal well-being. This underscores the importance for future social workers to pursue graduate education and consistently attend seminars and training to maintain and enhance their professional competence, leading to greater self-fulfillment in their work.

KEYWORDS: social work, drug reformist, community extension, experiences, phenomenology, Philippines

I. INTRODUCTION

The MSSW Community Extension Banner Project of the Social Work Program was initiated in March 2016 and concluded in March 2022. It represented a five-year collaboration with the local social work association, the Philippine Association of Social Workers Inc. (PASWI) Mindanao Chapter. The services provided to LGU Social Workers handling drug reformists included seminars and training sessions covering Basic Case Study Writing, addressing Ethical Dilemmas faced by social workers, and offering Psychological First Aid to address the self-care needs of the social workers. From a global perspective, the United Nations SDG #3, Good Health and Well-being, is particularly relevant to addressing the concerns of social workers who are vulnerable to health problems due to constant exposure to vulnerable clients. Additionally, Isik and Fredland (2023) emphasized the importance of self-care in human development for enhanced well-being, especially among adults requiring self-care.

Furthermore, based on expressions and observations, it is likely that social workers have experienced compassion fatigue due to the nature of their work, absorbing numerous problems from their clients daily. Even their family time may be affected (Kase et al., 2022; Ondrejкова et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that involvement in vulnerable cases significantly predicts compassion fatigue. Thus, this study serves as a revelation for social workers dealing with vulnerable clients, such as drug reformists (Ondrejкова et al., 2022).

Moreover, social workers can learn to motivate and protect themselves in stressful environments. Practicing self-care becomes essential, ensuring they do not exceed their time limits. A significant takeaway for social workers is the ability to delegate tasks to others, manage workload efficiently, and learn to say no when necessary, similar to caring for their careers (Drake et al., 2021). This study is grounded in empowerment theory (Wilkinson, 1998), emphasizing that social workers are empowered through self-care through attended training and seminars. Additionally, the theory of change (Reinholz et al., 2021) is applicable when evaluating the results of the implemented services.

The main objective of the study is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by social workers handling reintegrated drug reformists in the community. Additionally, it aims to assess the relevance of the training provided to social workers while working with drug reformists. Three specific objectives were addressed: First, to determine the impact of the implemented training and seminars on social workers handling drug reformists. Second, to understand how they overcame challenges in their work. Third, to identify insights gained by social workers based on the study results.

The study's results are anticipated to assist social workers in local government offices, DSWD social workers, DOH social workers, and NGO Social Workers handling drug reformists. The CSDWO may consider establishing support systems for social workers in this field, and the City Mayor's Office, CADAC, could develop additional programs to aid social workers. Furthermore, this study may serve as a foundation for future research with similar objectives. In a global context, it may enlighten social workers about the impact of stress on work-related activities, mainly when dealing with drug reformists who have faced dilemmas due to their backgrounds. Social workers can gain insights into practicing work-life balance in their interactions with drug reformists.

While the study may not cover all aspects, it contributes significantly to the understanding of social workers working with drug reformists in the field, acknowledging the challenges and harm experienced, especially when clients relapse and return to their former vices.

Objectives of the study

The objective of the study is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by social workers handling reintegrated drug reformists in the community. Additionally, it aims to assess the relevance of the training provided to social workers while working with drug reformists. Three specific objectives were addressed: First, to determine the impact of the implemented training and seminars on social workers handling drug reformists. Second, to understand how they overcame challenges in their work in application to the trainings attended. Third, to identify insights gained by social workers based on the trainings attended.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is likely that social workers have experienced compassion fatigue due to the nature of their work, absorbing numerous problems from their clients daily. Even their family time may be affected (Kase et al., 2022; Ondrejko et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that involvement in vulnerable cases significantly predicts compassion fatigue. Thus, this study serves as an eye-opener for social workers dealing with vulnerable clients, such as drug reformists (Ondrejko et al., 2022).

Moreover, social workers can learn to motivate and protect themselves in stressful environments. Practicing self-care becomes essential, ensuring they do not exceed their time limits. A significant takeaway for social workers is the ability to delegate tasks to others, manage workload efficiently, and learn to say no when necessary, similar to caring for their careers (Drake et al., 2021). This study is grounded in empowerment theory (Wilkinson, 1998), emphasizing that social workers are empowered through self-care through attended training and seminars. Additionally, the theory of change (Reinholz et al., 2021) is applicable when evaluating the results of the implemented services.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, prioritizing a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Data collection was conducted online to safeguard participants' privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, involving a carefully selected group of five participants. Ethical considerations and credibility were rigorously upheld, and data analysis adhered to traditional methods spanning one to two weeks. The analysis focused on the relevance of interventions, short and long-term effects, challenges, and insights unique to each participant.

Purposive sampling was utilized to select five social workers who had experience handling drug reformists and had attended seminars between 2016 and 2022 for the FGD. Drawing inspiration from Nyumba et al. (2018), the study adopted 90-minute FGD sessions accommodating 3-21 participants, capturing rich information and emerging themes. In-depth interviews were additionally conducted to gather individual perspectives on the impact of the seminars. Participants who did not work directly with drug reformists were intentionally excluded to ensure the relevance and specificity of the gathered data.

Due to time constraints, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were not feasible, and the study focused primarily on the FGD format. For the interviews, a researcher-made interview guide featuring three open-ended questions was meticulously validated. The administration of the interview guide took place during a two-hour FGD session, providing a structured yet flexible approach to eliciting participants' insights and experiences.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of the training implemented by the social work program

Motivation and Work:

According to the provided statement, social workers are motivated by their ability to provide services, especially Psychological First Aid (PFA), as highlighted by Hermosilla, Forthal, Sadowska, Magill, Watson, and Pike (2023) in the course of their professional responsibilities. The statement indicates that the social workers acquired skills in constructing sentences and basic case study writing during seminars, specifically emphasizing PFA. This knowledge enabled them to recognize that they were already delivering PFA, a service listed in their Operational Control Report (OCR), considered the "bible" of their office services. Moreover, the statement suggests that this realization empowered and educated the social workers, fostering a sense of accomplishment and recognition and potentially motivating them to continue delivering high-quality services to their clients (Sugiarti, 2023). Additionally, the statements highlight the social workers' awareness of their role in drug reform efforts, indicating that contributing to a more significant cause or social change, such as helping drug reformists, could be personally fulfilling and serve as a motivational factor for the social workers (London, Sessa, & Shelly, 2023). In summary, the social workers' motivation in their professional tasks seems to stem from their ability to provide valuable services, a sense of empowerment and recognition, and awareness of contributing to drug reform efforts (Sukad, 2023).

Impact of Training:

According to the social workers, the training significantly influenced their approach to writing case studies, providing substantial benefits and enhancing their knowledge. This statement clearly articulates the positive impact of training on social workers, especially regarding their ability to write case studies. The training contributed to their competence in handling clients, enabling them to cascade appropriate services, assess the need for enhanced data gathering, and conduct Psychological First Aid. Given that not all social workers receive training in these areas, especially when working with drug reformists, the significance of the training becomes evident. Overall, the statements underscore the importance of training for social workers and its positive impact on delivering effective services to their clients (Ombblero, 2020).

Helpfulness:

Social workers expressed gratitude for the training, noting its positive impact on their ability to handle drug reformists. The training deepened their understanding of their clientele, providing new knowledge and skills applicable to community work, particularly in serving drug reformists. Additionally, the training prompted social workers to realize the need for more comprehensive engagement with their clients, fostering the development of technical skills and a more insightful perspective toward their work. This newfound awareness of their role and responsibilities, coupled with acknowledging the limitations in their current knowledge and skills, highlights the transformative impact of the training (Breuning, 2023). In essence, the statements emphasize the positive effects of training on social workers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward their work, enabling them to serve their clients better and continuously enhance community services (King, 2023).

Knowledge and Understanding:

The seminars widened social workers' horizons, prompting them to realize the vast room for improvement in their work. By providing new knowledge and perspectives on understanding their clients, notably those undergoing drug reform, the seminars facilitated better service delivery that is both relevant and effective. Moreover, the workshops instilled a recognition within social workers that continuous learning and improvement are essential for delivering high-quality services to their clients. This acknowledgment widens their horizons and motivates them to pursue ongoing knowledge and skills development in their profession (Holford et al., 2023).

Experiences and Sharing:

Social workers sharing their experiences during the seminar proved invaluable, enabling them to learn from their colleagues and enhancing their collective knowledge base. Through such experiences, where participants share best practices, successes, and challenges, collaborative learning has improved job performance, job satisfaction, and client outcomes (Gitterman, 2014). Particularly in the context of drug reform, sharing experiences helps social workers understand complex challenges, overcome the stigma associated with drug use, navigate addiction and recovery complexities, and address legal and policy barriers effectively. Collaborative learning and shared experiences become powerful tools for professional development and improvement in client outcomes.

Confidence and Client Handling:

Facing challenges in field practice strengthened social workers and contributed to developing their confidence. Social workers often encounter challenging situations when working with clients, and building confidence is crucial for addressing these challenges effectively. Collaborative learning and knowledge sharing play a pivotal

role in building this confidence. Engaging in collaborative learning and sharing knowledge has been associated with higher levels of self-confidence among social workers, contributing to improved client outcomes and job satisfaction (Garg, 2021). Collaborative learning and knowledge sharing are valuable tools for social workers to develop their skills and enhance their practice.

Short and long-term impacts of attending the seminars

Short-Term Impact:

Social workers were instructed on identifying their strengths and weaknesses in their work with drug reformists. Seminars can affect social workers' short- and long-term professional development. In the short term, attending a seminar can help them recognize strengths and weaknesses in their practice. Reflective practices, such as identifying strengths and weaknesses, as highlighted by Goncalves, Viviera, and Silva (2017), have enhanced job performance and improved client outcomes. In the long term, attending a seminar can aid in building knowledge and skills, contributing to continuous professional development. Thus, participating in workshops can exert short- and long-term impacts on social workers' professional growth and effectiveness.

Knowledge Expansion:

Social workers have realized that their training expanded their understanding of dealing with clients. Training is valuable for social workers to enhance their knowledge and skills in working with clients. Hancock and Rogers (2018) emphasize that training can boost social workers' confidence and competence in their practice. Additionally, training provides a more nuanced understanding of their client's challenges, facilitating exploring new ways to address them. Overall, training effectively allows social workers to broaden their knowledge and improve their practice.

Long-Term Improvement:

Social workers have recognized the continuous need for improvement in applying knowledge gained from seminars. According to Alimoradi et al. (2021), social workers acknowledge the importance of consistently enhancing their knowledge and skills to elevate their practice. Their study revealed that social workers attending continuing education seminars reported heightened awareness of areas where they could improve their skills. Moreover, participants acknowledged the necessity for ongoing learning and development to sustain their competencies and deliver high-quality services to their clients.

Self-Awareness:

Social workers can identify their strengths and weaknesses through training. Carvalho et al. (2020) delved into the impact of self-awareness on the professional development of social workers, highlighting its essential role. The study found that self-awareness is crucial for social workers to recognize their strengths and limitations and develop effective strategies to address them. Social workers who participated in training reported increased awareness and improved ability to reflect on their practice, facilitating skill enhancement and providing better client services.

Skill Development:

Workers have their ability enhanced, especially when writing a case study report. Denholm et al. (2021) investigated the impact of professional development programs on the writing skills of social workers. The study revealed that social workers participating in the program significantly improved their ability to write clear, concise, and evidence-based case study reports. The program allowed social workers to develop skills through training, feedback, and practice, improving work quality and efficiency.

Practical Application:

Social workers learned extensively from the training, realizing the significance of transforming their existing knowledge into a broader one. Bogo et al. (2017) explored the practical application of social work training, finding that participating social workers reported significant learning and development. Participants could apply the knowledge gained from the training to their work, offering better services to their clients and enhancing their overall practice.

Unique challenges encountered in working with drug reformists

Client Engagement and Preparation:

Social workers exercise caution regarding clients' basic needs, especially when conducting meetings, necessitating them to prepare beforehand. Otherwise, there is a risk of having no audience during the scheduled appointment. Client engagement and preparation are crucial for effective social work practice, particularly in low-income settings where meeting basic client needs may pose challenges. A recent study by Tiwari et al. (2021) revealed that social workers who took the time to understand clients' basic needs and prepared for meetings were better able

to engage and build rapport. Social workers could establish trust and enhance the quality of services provided to clients by providing practical assistance, such as food and other necessities.

Unexpected or Surprising Situations

Social workers sometimes encounter dilemmas during their visits to the homes of Drug Reformists. Unexpected or surprising situations can arise during client visits, especially in the context of drug reform. According to Lee and O'Connor (2021), social workers working with drug reformists face numerous challenges, including the potential for violent or aggressive client behavior. These situations require social workers to be prepared and trained to manage conflicts while maintaining their safety and delivering effective client services.

Time Management and Scheduling Challenges:

Workers may face conflicting time commitments with drug reformists due to their work commitments. Time management and scheduling challenges are prevalent in social work practice, mainly when working with clients juggling work commitments or other obligations. Sharfstein and Hetherington (2019) discovered that social workers working with drug reformists encounter numerous scheduling and time management challenges. Flexibility and the ability to work outside regular business hours become crucial for social workers to accommodate clients' needs while meeting the demands of their work schedules.

Reactions and Responses:

Social workers are sometimes tested by their clients with shocking scenarios to provoke them. Social workers may encounter unexpected situations or scenarios during their work with clients that can be emotionally challenging or shocking. Klemm and colleagues (2020) emphasize that social workers must be prepared to respond appropriately to such situations while managing their emotions and reactions. Effective communication, active listening, and empathy become essential skills that social workers use to build trust and rapport with clients, even in challenging situations.

Insights gained in dealing with drug reformists

Empathy and Non-Judgment:

Social workers employ empathy and a non-judgmental attitude when interacting with drug reformists. Empathy and a non-judgmental approach are crucial in social work practice, especially when dealing with vulnerable and stigmatized populations. According to Gilchrist and colleagues (2020), social workers who demonstrate empathy and avoid being judgmental can build trust and rapport with clients, leading to better outcomes. These skills are critical when working with clients who have experienced trauma or are dealing with sensitive issues, such as victims of rape and VAWC (Violence against women and children).

Continuous Learning:

Continuous learning is integral to social work practice, enabling social workers to stay updated with the latest research, interventions, and approaches to assist their clients. Osterman and colleagues (2019) assert that social workers engaging in ongoing professional development experience better job satisfaction, increased confidence in their skills, and improved client outcomes. Therefore, social workers should consistently strive to enhance their knowledge and skills, as emphasized in the statement.

Self-Sufficiency and Independence:

Social workers aim to teach drug reformists self-reliance, discouraging excessive dependence on local government support for basic needs. In social work, the ultimate goal is to empower clients to become self-sufficient and independent. Research supports the importance of promoting self-sufficiency and independence among clients. Chonody and colleagues (2019) found that social workers utilizing a strength-based approach, focusing on empowering clients to become self-sufficient and autonomous, experience better client outcomes, and increase job satisfaction.

Responsibility and Service:

The fulfillment and responsibility of social workers lie in helping dysfunctional clients become functional, particularly in aftercare programs. Liao, Tsai, and Lu (2020) note that aftercare programs aim to support the recovery of individuals with substance use disorders and help them reintegrate into society. Social workers play a crucial role in facilitating these programs and providing services to assist clients in achieving self-sufficiency and independence.

Challenges and Consequences:

Social workers face challenges when dealing with demanding clients, particularly in the drug reformist sector, requiring patience and discernment. The literature on substance abuse and addiction treatment extensively discusses the challenges and consequences of managing demanding clients. This emphasizes the importance of developing communication skills and techniques for de-escalating tense situations (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016; NIDA, 2018).

Professional Competence:

Social workers must continually strive to enhance their professional competence through rigorous study, pursuing advanced degrees like Masters, and attending training aligned with their work and expertise. This commitment to learning and development ensures that social workers have the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to provide effective and ethical services to their clients (NASW, 2017; CSWE, 2015; SWDictionary, 2003).

V. Conclusion and Implication

This section outlines the implications and contributions of the study to the community. The findings underscore the necessity for a social work education program to build skills for working with vulnerable and stigmatized populations, fostering ongoing professional development among social workers. Policymakers and local governments should acknowledge the pivotal role of social workers in supporting drug reformists and allocate sufficient resources and support accordingly. Furthermore, social workers must prioritize self-awareness and reflective practices, which can enhance job performance and yield better client outcomes. Encouraging collaborative learning among social workers is essential, as it provides a valuable avenue for professionals to learn from each other and enhance their practice.

While MSSW community extension services have the potential to empower social workers dealing with drug reformists, there are limitations to consider. For instance, access to these services may be restricted in certain areas, and not all social workers can participate in training activities. Additionally, while attending seminars can impact social workers' professional development and effectiveness in the short and long term, it may only be feasible for some due to scheduling and financial constraints. Furthermore, the insights may not universally apply to all social workers working with drug reformists, given the unique nature of each client and situation. Social workers may also grapple with burnout and compassion fatigue due to work demands, necessitating prioritized attention. In conclusion, MSSW community extension services and the insights presented can be valuable in supporting social workers dealing with drug reformists. However, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the limitations and distinct challenges that social workers may encounter in this context.

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