

Examining and Understanding the Dynamics of COVID-19 Pandemic and the Ecosystems Theory-Social Work Perspectives

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Abstract

The novel COVID-19 has affected every aspect of our lives in tremendous and unimaginable ways. The systems impacted include healthcare, education, economy, employment, and social systems including children and families. It has also affected our political and legal systems including individual rights as well as national discourse and international travel and relations. The advent of this unique and extraordinary issue requires that professionals like social workers, doctors, counselors/therapists, and psychologists adapt their approaches, strategies, skills, services and interventions to better serve clients/patients and operate effectively in the new societal order. This article explores the effect and response to the COVID-19 Pandemic within the United States as well as in the global context and draw an analytical relationship between it and the ecosystems theory. Thus, using the conceptual framework of the ecosystems theory, I draw a relationship between human behavior and the social environment using anecdotal cases in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I contend that the polarized reactions from certain groups of individuals in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and mask mandates are because people are social beings and are inextricably impacted by their social and ecological environment, as well as factors within this environment, and requires a special examination, understanding, knowledge, adaptation, and strategic approach. Finally, I recommend best practice intervention approaches to social workers who are interacting and intervening with, and/or providing services to these unique clients to support healthy working relationships, and to facilitate a formidable needs assessment that leads to a successful and safe interaction and intervention.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, ecological-ecosystems theory, social work, culture competency, intervention, best practices

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020) has brought unimaginable pain and suffering to the world. It has disrupted and destroyed lives, economies, and systems of operation. The systems impacted are numerous such as healthcare, education, employment, and social systems including children and families. Mucci, Mucci, & Diolaiuti (2020) reported that, in an attempt to curtail the spread of the virus, governments around the world implemented more or less constricting isolation measures. Lockdown and social isolation have shown to be quite effective in physical containment, and at the same time mental health issues appear to be undercut by the inception of experiencing feelings such as fear, uncertainty and despair. Guessoum and colleagues (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to increased psychiatric disorders such as Anxiety Disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, as well as symptoms related to grief. The pandemic (Shah, Nogueras, Woerden, & Kiparoglou (2020) has also affected our political and legal systems as well as national discourse with respect to individual right, freedom of choice and liberty. This has compelled institutions and practitioners to adapt their practices to respond appropriately and in the most efficient way possible to this novel, complex, and dynamic situation. Professionals in the helping field are faced with a difficult yet important decision as to how to approach these delicate and sensitive dynamics by finding a balance, where individual rights collide with public healthcare demands and requirements to achieve a greater good for humanity. This requires them walking a fine line and achieve a delicate balance. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics requires us to facilitate individual self-determination and the dignity and worth of the person. How do social workers deliver services to clients within the confines of the public health guidelines without infringing on or upsetting a client's individual rights, beliefs and views on Covid-19 and related public health guidelines/mandates verse their self-determination? This is a very complex, sensitive and volatile issue which requires careful thoughts and approach, in order to prevent serious unintended consequences. Using the conceptual framework of the ecosystems theory, I drew a relationship between human behavior and the social environment. I argued that the polarized reactions from certain groups of individuals in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions are because people are social beings and are indistinguishably affected by their social and ecological environment, as well as factors within this context, as a result, this requires a distinctive examination, understanding, knowledge, adaptation, and calculated approach. Implications and recommendations for best practices are presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

Hutchison (2017) states, ecological theory, also known as ecosystems theory, focuses on the relationships and interactions between living organisms and their environments. Interdependence and mutual influence are emphasized. "The environment exerts influence on an individual, family, or group, but individuals, families, and groups can also have an impact on external systems (Hutchison, 2017, p. 33). This fits really well with the social issue of the COVID-19 Pandemic because it shows how the pandemic negatively affected the world and continues to do so and the human response to it demonstrating the inter-relationship and inter-dependence of people and their ecosystem/social system. We can see this manifestation

in our society as individuals in the world are being heavily impacted as well as in view of the fact that the virus is being spread or transmitted from person to person as we interact with each other. Consequently, it affects our livelihoods, our families, our communities, neighborhoods, organizations, nation and world. This has changed the trajectory of our lives in a revolutionary way.

3. Manifestations of Interdependence-Interconnectedness of Humans/Human Relationships

3.1 Internal Context: Covid-19 Impact and Responses within the United States

When the government and private entities made the decision to restrict human interactions, travel, and gatherings including introducing mask requirements and six-foot social distancing policies, many people revolted. They defied the common-sense logic based on science and a national public health issue and emergency. Many people made the choice to risk their lives in defiance of the restrictions and went to public places or gathered in groups without masks, social distancing, or observing the six-foot social distancing requirement. Some groups of people argued that it was their constitutional rights of freedom of assembly and movement which is enshrined under the first and fifth amendment of the US constitution, even as thousands of people were dying, hospitalized, or seriously ill. Those affected included their own family members, close relatives, or friends and neighbors. The issue was weaponized to be a politically charged social issue that pitted people against each other. Many on the right saw the restrictions such as wearing mask, social distancing, and restrictions of movements as an emotional political issue and this was galvanized and fueled by political leaders whose rhetoric accelerated highly flammable or explosive emotions.

On the other hand, many people on the left disagreed with the position of those on the right and viewed the restrictions as a public health issue and not abuse of constitutional rights. These polarized dynamics led to protests and clashes between anti-mask and restriction groups and those who support mask mandates and restrictions. This division was displayed even in the US capitol including on congressional floors and halls (of our revered lawmaking body) by lawmakers.

Other strong opponents of mask mandates and restrictions burned masks as a show of defiance and even stormed sacred places with heavy guns such as the Michigan State House and threatened the governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and other lawmakers who supported mask mandates and restrictions. For example, the governor of Georgia and the Mayor of Atlanta were at serious odds on the issue of mask mandates and restrictions.

4. Global Context: Covid-19 Impact, Challenges, and Responses around the World

The Covid-19 virus is alleged to have begun from Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China in 2019 (Atalan, 2020), but it quickly spread beyond the borders of China to globally. People across the world regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, age, social status, or income status have been affected negatively and tremendously. It has wreaked havoc to unimaginable proportions and put the world on its feet. Even with the miraculous invention of the COVID-19 vaccines, different mutations continue to pose a serious threat and disruptions to

our lives and livelihoods.

5. Trade, Commerce, and Travel

The pandemic has greatly affected the trade and commerce between countries and people across the world. As countries made decisions to close their borders to other countries or to ban or restrict travel from nations considered to have a high Covid-19 infection cases, this sent shock waves across the world. International trade and commerce, travel, tourism, and other important business and social transactions were negatively impacted and continue to be affected. Families and friends are being stripped apart by the travel restrictions.

6. Economic Impact

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Klein & Smith, 2021; Ettliger & Hensley, 2021) has been tremendous. Thousands of businesses closed down, thousands of workers were laid off, thousands lost their jobs forever, thousands lost their homes, thousands became homeless, and mental health problems are at an astronomical level and continues to afflict the world. To worsen the situation, crimes and suicide cases have also increased dramatically. Additionally, inflation has taken its toll on the global economy and the most vulnerable are bearing the worst blunt of this global crisis. As Ettliger & Hensley (2021) pointed out, the number of jobs lost and the deterioration in economic output were calamitous, and many individuals were hurt financially, in numerous cases severely.

7. Goods and Services

There is a great shortage of goods and services which has caused skyrocketing of prices (i.e. inflation) on consumer goods and services including food, clothing, sanitary items, housing (rental properties and homes) and even transportation i.e. vehicles and gas prices. The low-income families have been severely hit and devastated by all these problems. Aday & Aday (2020) contended that, the food supply chain, one of the most essential sectors of the economy, there is evidence that COVID-19 has an effect on the whole process, from the field to the consumer. In view of recent difficulties in the food supply chain, there is now significant apprehension about food production, processing, distribution, and demand. COVID-19 caused the movement restrictions of workers, modifications in demand of consumers, restricted food trade policies, shutting down of food production facilities, and financial pressures in the supply chain of food.

8. Implications

A careful analysis of the issues described in this paper demonstrate and support the theory (as posited by the Hutchinson (2017), that human beings are interconnected and interdependent with their ecosystem. This is also a manifestation that we are all heavily and naturally social beings and must be treated, understood, and approached accordingly. Social workers and other practitioners, especially those in the helping field must understand human behavior in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the ecological system theory, and adapt their approaches, strategies, interventions, and services or practices to effectively meet these unique conditions. Also, at the helm of these approaches and practices is the need for

the application of culture competencies with respect to culture awareness, sensitivity, relativity, and humility.

9. Recommendations for Best Practice Intervention

In this section, I offer recommendations for best practices in working with clients who have strong polarized views on the issue of masking and restrictions with respect to COVID-19. I begin with the premise that, people are social beings and aspire to excel in their social environment and depend on the social environment, interact with forces in the social environment, are impacted by the social environment and also affect the social environment in a mutually reciprocal fashion. This may explain the reason why peoples' responses or reactions to a national public health issue and related public health policies and restrictions are either mundane and/or provocative. This is no way supporting any position (one way or the other) on this critical social issue, however this article is an attempt to propound a working theory (1) to help explain human behavior in the social environment vis-avis the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic; and (2) provide a guide to social workers who are working with or will be working with or encountering these population during this critical and novel moment in our lives, as well as in the practice field.

10. Theoretical Models and Intervention Approach

The practice model that fits well with working with these group of clients is the strengths perspective. As social workers, we work to support, guide, and help our clients to succeed, be self-sufficient, healthy, as well as promote their safety, wellbeing, strengths and resiliency. We are also reminded by the NASW code of ethics (NASW, 2017) to facilitate self-determination and autonomy. The NASW code of ethics also requires social workers to do no harm (non-malevolence). The strengths perspective encourages the building of real or potential resiliency in recovery from, or adapting to, mental disorders, disasters and more to develop a greater sense of self-efficacy (Hutchison, 2017, p.111).

Secondly, the ecosystems theory of social work encourages social workers to examine the environment surrounding a person or group when trying to offer support and services. The exploration of factors in the environment include the habitat, adaptation, goodness-of-fit, and social niche. Social Work theoreticians have recognized that both person and the environment are important factors to understanding people's lives (Mattaini, 2008). People are inextricably linked to their environments and therefore it is my view that social workers should use the ecological model in conjunction with the systems theory as underlying frameworks from which to explore intervention with these clients from the strengths perspective.

Thirdly, the systems theory examines human behavior and problems from the perspective of the individual in the context of interrelated systems and effects. It takes holistic look at the client and the system in which the client operates in and how these systems are inter-connected and affect the client in a reciprocal fashion. In systems theory, we must look at all the factors affecting the client. Social workers look at the social, environmental, personal, and relational factors that contribute to negative emotions, negative outcomes, and difficulties. Systems theories assist us to think about these interactions between people and

their social and physical environments, and they help us to understand how change can occur through the use of ecosystem interventions (Connolly & Harms, 2011).

11. Social-Cultural Intelligence and Competency-Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity

Social workers must possess an understanding of the client population and their culture. Per the NASW Code of Ethics (standards 1.05), “social workers should demonstrate an understanding of culture and its function on human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures” (NASW, 2016). With this understanding and knowledge, the social worker can better relate to the client, understand the client behavior and the cause(s) of the behavior(s) (i.e. underlying factors and issues), and thus be able to gather relevant information, and consequently develop a culturally sensitive intervention that best meets the needs of that client. As noted earlier, it is imperative to apply culture competencies with regard to culture awareness, sensitivity, relativity, and humility. The social work ethos of beginning where the client is very relevant here.

12. Contextual Intelligence

Social workers must critically and analytically study or assess the context in which their clients reside and understand the contextual dynamics. They must develop knowledge about the “Dos and Don’ts” of the context/community, identify the stakeholders, the influential people, community leaders, powerbrokers, the history, culture, worldviews and the needs and strengths. The solutions to social problems should be approached from the perspective of the ecosystem theory and the most efficient way to develop an appropriate intervention is to gather adequate data on the client and their social context. Consequently, programs and services should be developed to help overcome client’s problems from both the ecosystems theory and strengths perspective. Social workers could view a client facing life challenges as an individual who is in the middle of a turbulent river carrying a load that could potentially cause drowning; all they need is a life jacket to help them stay afloat and alive, and with the appropriate help and support (sometimes with just a little help), they will swim courageously all the way to the shore, access land, and thrive independently. From the strengths perspective, the social worker should identify the abilities and capacities of the client that can be activated, facilitated, empowered or invigorated to achieve success, thus reaching ashore successfully. From the ecological and systems perspective, the social worker should explore the factors or forces within the client’s environment (e.g. the river, land, air, structures, systems, social, cultural, political, economic, health, etc.), that may be at play causing or contributing to client’s problems and address them effectively.

13. Political Intelligence

The social worker needs to be abreast with the social issues that are intertwined with the national political discourses and how the client population view and response to this. This political intelligence refers to being politically astute with at least the basic understanding of socio-political issues and how they are playing out in the current social and political climate, to promote political prudence and judiciousness. It will also help to prevent the social worker

from saying things clients may consider upsetting or politically insensitive, and avoid such conflicts and unnecessary distractions in the therapeutic or working relationship.

14. Emotional Intelligence

The social worker should possess a good level of emotional intelligence so that they will be able to effectively manage their emotions when the client intentionally incites them with a politically, socially, or culturally inappropriate statements or vulgarities. With the possession of this set of skill, in case this happens, the social worker can professionally and effectively manage, diffuse, or redirect the client's provocative behavior.

15. Conclusion

From the framework of the ecological systems theory, there are three important factors or systems at play that must be recognized, critically analyzed, and considered in our practice, research and theory development. First, the Biological system-the organism, which is the Covid-19 virus. Second, the Environmental system-the effect of the virus on society (i.e. social, economic, healthcare, education, and political systems, among others). Third, Human Behavior in response to the effects of the virus/Covid-19 on our social systems and lives, including the extraordinary disruptions to our normal social and ecological equilibrium. The struggle is to find a feasible balance while fighting the virus effectively. We live in a new world order that was brought by the advent of the novel COVID-19 pandemic. This unusual and vicious virus has introduced dramatic and tremendous effects on our lives and our livelihoods as natural social beings. It has radically disrupted and devastated our lives at multiple levels including at the micro, meso, and macro levels (individual, families, groups, neighborhoods, communities, societies, systems, and nations globally). This revolutionary and consequential development and change requires a novel response. The aforementioned theories and practice guides are conceptual frameworks and proposed skill-sets that will help social workers to effectively deal with clients and meet their needs with less conflicts and issues in the dynamic context of the pandemic and its unique challenges and related human behaviors. Social workers need to adapt to this new world order by applying innovative skills and approaches in delivering services to clients. These include applying cultural competencies and intelligence-cultural awareness, sensitivity, humility, and social diversity, as well as political, emotional, social, and environmental-contextual intelligence.

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