

FEATURE ARTICLE

Exploring nurse-led political activism in the Philippines: A conceptual framework

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Abstract

This paper examines nurse-led political activism in the context of contemporary socio-political issues in the Philippines. This paper integrates Martha Nussbaum's transitional anger as a factor that can help catalyze transformational change. It will be argued that while political activist movements may help counter income inequality and poor working conditions, the concept of moral inertia warrants critical analysis.

In opening her work *Caste: The origins of our discontents*, Wilkerson (2020) presented the case of the Siberian permafrost where after a heat wave in the Siberian tundra, children of indigenous herdsmen contracted a disease that was never before known among medical authorities. Scientific analyses soon revealed that the heat wave melted layers of permafrost that had hidden an anthrax toxin for more than 79 years ago (Wilkerson, 2020). The heat wave that melted the Siberian permafrost can be likened to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic to the nursing profession. Similar to the heat wave, the SARS-CoV-2 virus exposed pre-existing issues related to income inequality and poor working conditions that have long plagued the profession but were continually swept under the carpet.

On the 8th of November 2019, hundreds of nurses in the Philippines participated in the Nurses' National Day of Protest to express their discontent over the delayed implementation of Republic Act 6758, which stipulates an increase in the salary of nurses from Salary Grade 11 to Salary Grade 15 (David, 2019). In the said event, Dr. Erlinda Palaganas, the Philippine Nurses Association (PNA) president, questioned the undignified and

unjust status of nurses who continue to be overworked and are only entitled to a meager income (David, 2019). Dr. Palaganas added that the Philippines has more than enough supply of nurses but because of existing poor working conditions, many nurses decide to migrate or consider other industries that provide better remuneration (David, 2019). This research proposal is all about income inequality and poor working conditions among nurses. This paper explores the potential of nurse-led political activism in destabilizing oppressive structures that perpetuate marginalization among nurses.

The nurses' national Day of Protest will be taken in retrospect as the departure point of inquiry. While historical examples of protests have led to positive changes in society, several obstacles have to be first overcome. I will argue that income inequality among nurses is a neocolonial problematique that can be destabilized by political activism imbued with transitional anger (see Fig. 1). However, actualizing political activism as one strategy of achieving positive change may be threatened by moral and political inertia.

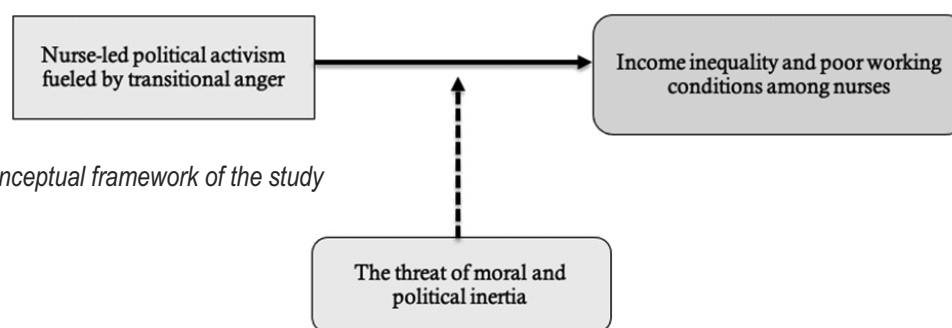


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

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1. Political activism and health disparities

Health activism is a "conscious and robust effort" (Florell, 2020) that involves challenging an oppressive status quo by going beyond prevailing or traditional modes of action (Laverack, 2012). In the history of nursing, nurses have demonstrated the possibility of countering oppressive regimes by engaging in political activism. Margaret Sanger, a nurse feminist, advocated for birth control in a time when contraception was considered to be socio-culturally unacceptable in the United States of America (Rogers, n.d.). In another example, Dorothea Dix championed the humane treatment of people who are mentally ill by questioning harsh practices like caging (Parry, 2006). Despite the historic successes of political activism, there exists areas that warrant closer examination. Barriers, be it in the form of ideology or lack of government support, need to be analyzed for a political activist movement to effect change in society.

Laverack (2012) explains that the conceptualization of health as an individualized phenomenon resulted in the neglect of the broader political landscape in which it is situated. Under the ideology of individualism, people who are victims of ill-health are blamed for their poor health outcomes in which they have full responsibility and autonomy (Laverack, 2012). These victims of ill-health, as a consequence, feel that they have no right or stimulus to modify their condition (Laverack, 2012). Framing health in the lens of individualism may make collective action challenging because it insinuates the importance of a personal response that is farfetched from the broader structural causes of inequality (Laverack, 2012). After years of enduring an income that ranges between PhP 8,000-13,500 (DOLE, n.d.), nurses in the Philippines have undoubtedly considered working overseas to earn an income that is way higher than local rates (DOLE, n.d.). In some situations, registered nurse professionals even considered other industries like working in healthcare information management (HIM) companies under the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry where they can earn between PhP 18,000-24,000 (Jalandoni, 2013) just to make ends meet. Individualism in this sense becomes apparent in the fact that nurses have to consider other better-paying industries because the government has limited capacities in bringing about necessary structural changes to improve the working conditions of nurses.

As to what can effectively constitute an activist organization, Laverack (2012) added that numbers would be futile if there is no solid organizational structure and deliberate partnership and engagement with other groups. While economic resources in the form of funding are needed, it is unfortunate to note that organizations that depend on the government for financing are often opposed to the idea of health activism for fear of attracting negative portrayal in the media; a situation that may result in reduced funding (Laverack, 2012). In recent times, engagement in political activism in the Philippines has become more complicated due to the recent anti-terror law's recent passage last July 2020 (Beltran, 2021). Critics have strongly voiced their opposition to the anti-terror law because it has a very general definition of terrorism to the extent that some forms of activism may be considered terrorist acts (Beltran, 2021). In addition, individuals suspected of terrorism may be arrested without any warrant and subjected to no judicial intervention (Beltran, 2021). In the face of income inequality, nurses in the Philippines may again question their prospect of engaging in political activism due to the unintended consequences of the anti-terror law. Once branded as a terrorist, it may become more complicated for nurses to apply for employment opportunities abroad or even consider other local industries. It must be noted that the anti-terror law was even passed at a time when protests that demand state accountability was being held: both online using different social media platforms, and in person. The overall experience of income inequality will be subsequently discussed as a possible manifestation of neocolonialism in the next section.

2. A neocolonial problematique

For McGibbon et al. (2014, p.180), postcolonialism is a "constellation of interwoven processes and practices" that "is concerned with the unequal relations of power." Postcolonialism, in addition, is said to be legacy of the colonial past that is still evident at present (McGibbon et al., 2014). As to the purpose of postcolonial theory in health care, Bickford (2014) said that postcolonialism aims to challenge the long-held supremacy of the West in perpetuating inequality in its former colonies. Decolonization in a sense involves amplifying the voices of those who have been relegated in the margins (Bickford, 2014). On the other hand, the word neocolonialism pertains to the indirect socio-political and economic control of former colonial masters to newly independent colonies (Afisi, n.d.). In Philippine nursing, several reports have already documented the migration of nurses to Western countries where salary is higher (Lorenzo et al., 2007) despite the fact that there is a low nurse/population ratio in the country (Dayrit, 2018). In the level of nursing education, schools of nursing were also observed to have already adopted the "train for export" model (Buchan & Catton, 2020) whereby local schools of

nursing may match the curriculum of Western destination countries (Dayrit, 2018). The migration of nurses and the adoption of a “train for export” model can be interpreted as manifestations of neocolonialism for its association to indirectly servicing the needs of the West despite the more immediate needs of the ailing Philippine healthcare system.

As one strategy to address the situation, McGibbon et al. (2014) suggests that decolonizing nursing may consist of exposing colonial ideologies even if they are deeply embedded in nursing education, practice, and research. The very act of exposing colonizing ideologies has been interpreted herein as, to some extent, a call for nurses to engage in political activism. Health activism is political for the reason that its manifestations correspond with gaps or inadequacies that stem in the political realm (Laverack, 2012). Also, health activism is political because the success of a political activist movement depends on the support or opposition of the government (Laverack, 2012).

Anger is said to be an “effective mobilizer” in the face of injustice (Satell & Popovic, 2017). However, people who engage in activist movements must not get into the tendency of vilifying others whose views and opinions run counter to their activist advocacies (Satell & Popovic, 2017); a tendency that mimics the habits of former colonizers in the context of postcolonialism (Bickford, 2014). In addition, Satell & Popovic (2017) suggests that people in activist movements must clearly articulate the type of change they want to achieve. This recommendation resonates in the work of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2015, p.55) who said that anger has a functional utility in the sense that it is a “useful wake-up call” so that we may focus on future welfare. Nussbaum’s (2015) transitional anger, in addition, calls for a consideration of diverse viewpoints in reconstructing a future that takes into account the welfare of those who are marginalized. Addressing income inequality and the poor working conditions of nurses in the Philippines, therefore, require political activism with the addition of Nussbaum’s transitional anger. The following section discusses the notion of inertia; a force that can undermine the possibility of actualizing a political activist movement.

3. Moral and political inertia

In defining the word “inertia”, Maxwell (1991) traces its origin in the physical sciences as a word that refers to a body at rest. Consequently, this term may be equated with inaction or passivity in the face of social evils or injustice (Maxwell, 1991). For Laverack (2013) activism must be regarded as a legitimate approach in reversing or challenging top-down mechanisms that contribute to ill-health. In addition, health activism must be seen as an alternative that can be considered when innovative ideas

in the level of politics and economics are lacking (Laverack, 2013). In relation to the concept of inertia, the success of health activism depends on the willingness of individuals and groups to engage in activism as a way of addressing the roots of health inequity in society (Laverack, 2013). The previous section of this paper discussed the brief nature of political activism in countering injustices. However, moral inertia can prevent the full actualization of a political activist movement. Moral inertia can manifest in the individual, community, and national domains. On the individual level, people may have difficulty responding to injustice because they cannot perceive the problem in the first place (Maxwell, 1991). Could this reason be attributed to the “train for export” model in nursing education that blinds local nurses from the socio-political contexts of injustice? Could the rampant availability of BPOs and the prospect of migration possibly prevent nurses from engaging in meaningful political activism? In the level of communities and the population at large, people also incline to be unrealistically optimistic, i.e., believing that the injustices at present will eventually be resolved (Maxwell, 1991). Can the belief of a utopic future be a sign of exhaustion with activist movements that ended for naught, as evidenced by the persistence of income inequality? Also, a state of moral inertia is sustained when people hesitantly engage in political movements because doing so is a deviation from a social norm (Maxwell, 1991). But, is this fear from deviating more deeply entrenched on the possibility of being red-tagged or, worse, assassinated under the current political regime? (UN News, 2021).

Future directions

The intricate entanglement of issues related to political activism motivated the writing of this paper. This paper started with a brief discussion of the Siberian permafrost and how, in a way, parallels can be gleaned in nursing. If not because of COVID-19, perhaps many would still be unaware of the apparent value of nurses. The issue of income inequality and poor working conditions have historical underpinnings that have been given limited action by various actors. Studying the narratives of activists can perhaps inform nurses at present and those in the future on how to negotiate change in the face of glaring power imbalances. In the state of scientific literature on nurse-led political activism, there exists a paucity of sources in the local setting. Political activist events that involve nurses are usually limited to news reports. Charmaz (2008, p.210) claims that “we need to treat concepts as problematic and look for their characteristics as lived and understood, not as given in textbooks.” In the level of nursing education, there is limited knowledge on how educators may impart the value of activism in the classroom (Buck-McFadyen & MacDonnell, 2017) despite the importance of “cultivat[ing] politically active

nurses" (Zauderer et al., 2008-2009). Undertaking researches on political activism can possibly fill in these gaps to supply the academe with a raw material for the integration of the concept of activism.

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