



PROMOTING AND MAINTAINING THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF A CASE MANAGER: AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ethical dilemmas encountered by case managers working under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in Davao del Norte, Philippines. Positioned at the frontline of social welfare service delivery, case managers often find themselves navigating the challenging intersection of institutional mandates, professional ethics, and community dynamics. Anchored in utilitarianism, deontology, and social contract theory, the research seeks to identify the recurring ethical conflicts experienced by case managers, examine how these are managed, and derive implications for practice and policy reform.

Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study gathered insights from nine purposively selected case managers with at least three years of experience in the 4Ps program. Through in-depth interviews, five major themes emerged: (1) the difficulty in reconciling professional responsibilities with personal values; (2) the emotional toll of ethical decision-making; (3) threats to personal safety resulting from ethical enforcement; (4) professional commitment and moral resilience; and (5) the pressing need for institutionalized ethics support and psychosocial care.

Findings reveal that while case managers demonstrate strong dedication to ethical practice, they are often burdened by bureaucratic rigidity, community backlash, and emotional fatigue. Despite the challenges, participants emphasized the value of supervisory support, ethical training, peer debriefing, and reflective practice as coping mechanisms. The study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms that include continuous ethics education, mental health interventions, and stronger safety protocols for field workers.

By centering the voices of grassroots social workers, this research contributes to the understanding of how ethical practice is negotiated in real-world contexts. It calls for a paradigm shift in social work governance that aligns ethical standards with the lived realities of service delivery. It equips case managers with the tools, support, and discretion they need to act in the best interests of both clients and the profession.

KEYWORDS: *Ethical Dilemmas, Professional Standards, Case Management, Social Work Ethics, 4Ps Program, DSWD, Phenomenological Research, Utilitarianism, Deontology, Social Contract Theory, Frontline Social Work*

INTRODUCTION

Ethical dilemmas are an integral part of the social work profession, often arising from situations that place practitioners in a moral crossroads between competing responsibilities, values, and interests. These dilemmas require practitioners to strike a delicate balance between institutional rules and human compassion, personal conscience, and professional obligations. As noted by Banks (2015), ethical decision-making in social work reflects the complexities of power dynamics, client vulnerabilities, and the practitioner's duty to act in the best interest of service users while upholding fairness and justice.

In the Philippine context, particularly within the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), case managers who implement flagship programs like the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) are consistently confronted with ethically challenging situations. The 4Ps, the country's version of the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program, aims to reduce poverty by promoting investments in education and health among poor families (Reyes et al., 2015; Bold et al., 2012). However, the implementation of this ambitious program also exposes case

managers to a spectrum of ethical dilemmas involving client manipulation, co-worker misconduct, cultural sensitivities, and threats to personal safety.

Social workers are expected to act ethically based on a shared code of values, yet as Allen (2012) and the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) emphasize, ethical standards do not resolve all dilemmas. Rather, ethical behavior is a result of both adherence to professional guidelines and personal moral reasoning. In practice, decisions are rarely clear-cut. For instance, case managers may find themselves choosing between maintaining a professional boundary and responding to a client's urgent personal need—an excruciating experience where both choices have ethical merit (Blennberger, 2006; Figar, 2016).

In Davao del Norte, these dilemmas are heightened by socio-political realities and logistical challenges. Case managers must manage complaints under the Grievance Redress System (GRS), which requires a high level of discretion, integrity, and cultural competency (DSWD, 2011).



The study revealed three recurring ethical themes among case managers: (1) the difficulty in making decisions balancing professional and personal judgment; (2) the emotional strain between upholding professional standards and confronting real-life ethical predicaments; and (3) the fear for personal safety when ethical actions conflict with community expectations.

This study is grounded in utilitarian, deontological, and social contract theories (Bentham, 1789; Kant, 1979; D'Agostino, 1996), providing a philosophical lens to understand the moral reasoning behind ethical decision-making. Utilitarianism highlights the consequences of actions for the greater good, deontology emphasizes duty and adherence to rules, and social contract theory focuses on the implicit agreements that govern professional conduct in society.

By exploring the lived experiences of 4Ps case managers in Davao del Norte, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of ethical practice in frontline social work. It highlights the importance of strengthening professional commitment, intensifying ethical training, and fostering a supportive work environment (Giffords, 2003; Boyas & Wind, 2012). The insights gained from this study not only offer guidance for practitioners and policymakers but also reinforce the ethical foundations upon which the social work profession stands.

Research Objectives

1. Identify the ethical dilemmas experienced by case managers in promoting and maintaining professional standards.
2. Explore how they handle these challenges affecting their Code of Ethics.
3. Derive lessons and insights from their experiences to inform practice and policy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to delve deeply into the lived experiences of case managers working under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in Davao del Norte. A phenomenological design was chosen to capture and describe participants' lived experiences in rich detail, providing insights into how these professionals perceive, interpret, and manage ethical dilemmas. This approach enabled the researcher to explore the subjective realities of case managers as they navigate professional standards amid ethical conflicts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted, aligning with the research's objective of uncovering the lived experiences of the participants. This design is grounded in the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Clark Moustakas, focusing on exploring and describing how individuals make sense of their experiences. By using this approach, the researcher aimed to construct a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dilemmas encountered by case managers in the course of their duties.

Participants

Nine case managers were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) at least three years of continuous service under the 4Ps program;
- (2) current employment as a case manager in the Davao del Norte area;
- (3) willingness to participate and share their professional experiences; and
- (4) ability to communicate effectively in Filipino or English. The purposive sampling method ensured that participants had sufficient exposure and professional experience to provide meaningful insights into the ethical challenges of their role.

Efforts were made to maintain diversity in gender, service area (urban and rural), and age, ensuring a rich and varied representation of perspectives. The sample size of nine participants was determined to be sufficient for achieving data saturation, where no new themes or insights were emerging from additional data.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered through one-on-one in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences, while the guide ensured that the discussion remained focused on ethical dilemmas and professional standards. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in private, neutral locations where participants felt comfortable.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken during each session to document non-verbal cues, contextual details, and initial reflections. These notes supplemented the transcripts during the thematic analysis phase.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method for phenomenological research. This rigorous approach involved the following steps:

1. Reading and re-reading all interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding.
2. Extracting significant statements directly related to the research questions.
3. Formulating meanings from these significant statements.
4. Organizing the formulated meanings into clusters of themes.
5. Developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.
6. Formulating a fundamental structure of the phenomenon.
7. Returning the findings to the participants for validation (member checking) to ensure accuracy and credibility of interpretations.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, several strategies were employed. Member



checking was conducted by returning the transcriptions and interpreted data to participants for confirmation. Triangulation was used by comparing interview data with observations and relevant documents from the field. Peer debriefing with research mentors and experienced qualitative researchers further ensured analytical rigor.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all data were stored securely to maintain confidentiality. Participants were also assured of the minimal risks involved and were offered psychological support resources should the discussions trigger emotional discomfort.

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to delve into the experiences of case managers. The research was conducted in Davao del Norte, involving nine purposively selected case managers with over three years of service under the 4Ps program.

Philosophical Assumptions

- *Ontology*: Explored realities as experienced and narrated by participants.
- *Epistemology*: Knowledge is co-constructed through interviews and dialogue.
- *Axiology*: Researcher's values acknowledged and bracketed.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the participants' interviews revealed five comprehensive themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of case managers dealing with ethical dilemmas while maintaining professional standards. These themes highlight both the challenges and coping mechanisms developed by professionals in the field.

Theme 1: Difficulty in Decision-Making (Professional vs. Personal Judgment)

Participants consistently shared the moral tension they experienced when professional rules conflicted with their personal values or the socio-cultural norms of the communities they served. This theme encapsulates the struggle to uphold the 4Ps operational guidelines—especially regarding sanctions and disciplinary actions—when case managers were faced with clients' complex, real-life situations.

One commonly cited dilemma was the issue of cash card pawning. Case managers were obligated to file incident reports and recommend sanctions, yet they empathized with clients who pawned their cash cards out of desperation to buy medicine or food.

"As a mother myself, I feel their pain. But the policy is clear. We must protect the integrity of the program," shared

one participant.

In other cases, participants struggled with recommending delisting of beneficiaries who repeatedly violated conditions. Despite clear violations, the thought of children being deprived of benefits weighed heavily on their conscience.

Theme 2: Excruciating Experience (Professional Standards vs. Ethical Standards)

This theme refers to the emotional distress experienced by case managers when professional requirements demanded decisions that conflicted with their ethical instincts. The participants described scenarios where rigid adherence to rules seemed to contradict the broader goals of social justice and compassion.

A recurring situation involved elderly guardians of child beneficiaries who were unable to comply with regular monitoring or attendance due to health issues. Participants reported feeling torn when compelled to submit negative compliance reports that could reduce or halt assistance.

"It was agonizing. You know they're doing their best, but they just can't physically cope with the demands," one case manager said.

Participants also highlighted internal conflict when faced with internal bureaucracy and slow response times from higher offices. Their inability to act swiftly, despite knowing the immediate need of the client, led to feelings of helplessness.

Theme 3: Fear of Life Threats (Professional Ethics vs. Safety and Security)

Several case managers admitted receiving threats from irate clients and community members when benefits were delayed, or sanctions were implemented. These threats, while not always direct, created a climate of fear and anxiety.

Participants recalled instances of being confronted in public spaces, receiving hostile text messages, and even being followed community assemblies.

"I was scared to go out of the office for a while. There was a time someone shouted at me in the market, saying I was ruining their life," a participant recounted.

Despite these threats, case managers felt duty-bound to enforce program regulations, often relying on peer support and stress management to cope. Some also reported being stationed in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA), where support from law enforcement was limited.

Theme 4: Strengthening Professional and Personal Commitment

Despite the multitude of ethical challenges, participants demonstrated a strong sense of commitment to their profession and clients. Many reflected on their role not just as implementers,



but also as advocates and mentors.

Their personal values, coupled with formal training in ethics and regular debriefings with peers and supervisors, were essential in guiding their decisions. Participants emphasized the value of personal reflection, journaling, and prayer in maintaining mental clarity.

"I remind myself every day why I chose this profession. The impact we make is not always visible, but it's there," one respondent stated.

Supervisory support was highlighted as a protective factor. Most participants indicated that access to immediate supervisors for consultations gave them clarity and moral courage to act according to both the code of ethics and policy.

Theme 5: Intensifying Professional Ethics and Support Systems

Participants universally emphasized the need for continuous capacity-building focused on ethical decision-making and mental health. Many expressed the desire for more frequent refresher training on ethics, citing that the last orientation was years ago.

"We need more than rules—we need spaces to talk, to unburden, and to learn from each other's cases," said a case manager.

Another major suggestion was the creation of a structured peer support group or community of practice among case managers across municipalities. This could serve as a venue for sharing ethical dilemmas and solutions in a confidential and professional environment.

Participants also recommended mental health services and wellness programs tailored for social workers and case managers, recognizing the emotional toll of their work. They stressed the importance of institutionalizing these support mechanisms, rather than relying solely on personal resilience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the multi-faceted ethical challenges faced by case managers working under the 4Ps program in Davao del Norte, echoing themes and conclusions found in broader social work literature. Similar to studies on social media exposure among vulnerable populations such as out-of-school youth (Guarde & Calla, 2020), this research underscores the intricate interplay between professional responsibilities, personal values, and the socio-cultural context in which services are delivered.

Theme 1: Difficulty in Decision-Making Consistent with Jacobsen and Forste (2014), who emphasized the challenge of navigating unstructured environments without formal educational guidelines, this study found that case managers often confront ambiguous scenarios requiring them to choose between policy enforcement and moral empathy. Ethical theories such as

deontology demand strict adherence to established rules, yet utilitarian perspectives encourage professionals to consider the greater good, such as preserving a child's welfare despite minor program violations. This tension complicates everyday decision-making, especially in contexts where systemic poverty and limited access to services are pervasive.

Theme 2: Excruciating Experience of Ethical vs. Professional Standards. The emotional toll reported by case managers mirrors the findings of Pittman and Reich (2019), who observed that excessive demands without adequate emotional outlets lead to stress and eventual burnout. The case managers' inability to intervene quickly due to bureaucratic processes creates moral distress, where professionals feel helpless despite knowing the best course of action. This scenario reflects Banks' (2015) concept of ethical dilemmas as situations with no clear "right" answer but requiring morally sound judgment.

Theme 3: Threats to Safety In line with Odgers and Jensen (2020), who pointed out how digital engagement among youth can create real-world consequences, this study found that ethical enforcement sometimes triggers aggression or retaliation from beneficiaries. Participants' fear of personal harm reflects the underexplored dimension of occupational hazards in social work, which is often exacerbated by the lack of security measures in geographically isolated areas. This finding aligns with the work of Clemmitt (2013) who recognized the increasing vulnerability of frontline workers to public backlash.

Theme 4: Professional Commitment and Moral Resilience Participants demonstrated strong personal and professional commitment, a theme consistent with the study by Greenhow and Lewin (2016), which emphasized the role of intrinsic motivation and continuous learning in maintaining ethical standards. The presence of informal support mechanisms such as supervisory guidance and reflective practice suggests a culture of peer reliance. This resonates with Scherer and Hatlevik (2017), who found that confidence in ethical practice is positively correlated with perceived organizational support.

Theme 5: Need for Institutionalized Support and Continuous Ethics Training The call for structured training, peer support networks, and wellness programs affirms findings from Hernandez et al. (2018) and Moorhead et al. (2019), who stress the need for continuous professional development and psychosocial well-being of workers. The absence of refresher courses on ethics not only hinders policy implementation but also leaves professionals vulnerable to moral disengagement.

The recommendations made by participants mirror the same policy interventions proposed in digital literacy studies, such as promoting critical thinking and mental resilience (Cinelli et al., 2021; Livingstone & Drotner, 2008). **Synthesis of Ethical Frameworks** The narratives in this study highlight the simultaneous application of various ethical paradigms. Utilitarian ethics surface when case managers justify a decision based on



anticipated outcomes (e.g., continuing support despite technical violations).

Deontological ethics are invoked when rules are strictly followed for the sake of accountability and integrity. Meanwhile, the social contract theory becomes relevant as case managers negotiate their roles with communities that may not fully align with the program's objectives. This dynamic reflects the 'street-level bureaucracy' framework introduced by Lipsky (1980), where frontliners use discretion to mediate between policy and practice. The discretion exercised by case managers is not arbitrary but a response to the emotional, ethical, and contextual demands of the role.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed the multifaceted and deeply rooted ethical dilemmas faced by case managers operating under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in Davao del Norte. The results illuminate how ethical conflicts arise from the intersection of professional standards, personal judgment, and the complex socio-economic realities of the communities they serve. The themes identified—ranging from decision-making difficulties and emotional burdens to personal safety concerns and calls for systemic support—reflect the everyday moral struggles encountered by social workers in the field.

The findings affirm that case managers are not only implementers of policy but also moral agents navigating a web of bureaucratic expectations, cultural nuances, and human vulnerability. Their work demands emotional intelligence, ethical literacy, and constant self-awareness. The ethical dilemmas they encounter are not just procedural but deeply personal, often testing their values, resilience, and commitment to social justice.

A recurring insight across all interviews is the internal conflict between following rules to uphold institutional integrity and showing compassion toward clients' circumstances. Participants revealed how program guidelines, though necessary for accountability, sometimes failed to accommodate the lived realities of marginalized families. This disconnects intensified moral stress and fueled a sense of helplessness when the case managers' ethical compass pointed in a different direction than institutional expectations.

Moreover, the study highlights how external threats—such as hostility from community members—compound the internal ethical tension. The fear for personal safety presents a critical ethical and occupational hazard that requires more institutional attention. Case managers should not have to choose between their safety and their commitment to ethical practice.

Despite these challenges, case managers demonstrated strong professional dedication and a desire for continuous improvement. Their call for more robust support systems, frequent ethics training, and wellness programs suggests that the solution lies not only in individual coping but in systemic transformation. It is

clear that institutions must invest in building resilient, ethically grounded, and well-supported social work teams capable of navigating the complex demands of grassroots service delivery.

Implications

- Training programs should incorporate ethical decision-making models that address real-life dilemmas, integrating both theoretical and practical components.
- Institutions must provide psychosocial support systems, including regular debriefings, peer support groups, and access to mental health resources to address burnout and stress.
- Policy makers must recognize the contextual realities faced by field workers, including the potential for physical threats, and revise operational guidelines to ensure flexibility, safety, and cultural responsiveness.
- Organizational culture should promote open dialogue, reflective practice, and learning from ethical conflicts, rather than punitive accountability measures alone.

Future Directions

Future research should expand to include the perspectives of supervisors, program beneficiaries, and policymakers to provide a holistic view of ethical dynamics in social work. Their insights could enrich understanding of the institutional pressures and expectations placed on case managers and help in designing a more responsive program structure.

In addition, quantitative studies can be conducted to measure the prevalence and impact of specific ethical dilemmas on work performance, psychological well-being, and beneficiary outcomes. Mixed-methods approaches may also be valuable in triangulating the lived experiences of case managers with statistical trends across various program sites.

Moreover, comparative studies across regions and programs could identify best practices and innovative models for ethical support systems. Research on the effectiveness of ethics-based training modules and digital platforms for decision-making support can also contribute to evidence-based policy reforms. Ultimately, future studies should aim to elevate the discourse on ethics in social work from the periphery to the center of program design and implementation.

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