

The Dilemma and Resolution of Public Psychological Services during the Pandemic of COVID-19

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Abstract: The pandemic of COVID-19 seriously threatens the human right of subsistence, intensifies social contradictions, and hinders the economic development of the country. Since Wuhan's lock down on 23 January, 2020, these concerns were spreading out in the entire country. Fortunately, during the pandemic the government had realized the importance of constructing psychosocial services in the emergency management system. It not only involves the psychology health of individual, but also encompasses the health of social management. Psychosocial services are not only referred to as psychological health counseling for individuals, but are also involved in the process of building the psychosocial service system. There are still many obstacles, such as cognitive errors, inappropriate management, waste of resources and lack of professionals. Therefore, it is necessary to change Chinese people's concept of psychological service, improve management efficiency by taking advanced of up-to-dated science and technology, and emphasize the training of psychology professionals. In addition, the applied psychology system and social governance practice should be perfectly combined to constructing a psychosocial service system.

Keywords: Psychosocial Service System; Pandemic of COVID-19; Emergency Management; Social Mentality

1. Introduction

The prevention and control of the pandemic relies not only on protecting individuals' physical health, but also on protecting psychological health. In the national emergency management and social governance, special attention should be paid to psychological construction. In practice, China has incorporated social psychological counseling into the overall deployment of pandemic prevention and control, which has achieved significant progress. During the prevention and control of COVID-19, people's mental states tend to be peaceful, social order maintains stable, and economy begins to rise and develop, which benefit from China's emphasis on the construction of psychosocial service system. During the severe period of the pandemic, people consciously reducing the frequency of going out, wearing masks, monitoring body temperature when entering and leaving public places. These are all the evidences that citizens' rationality has been improved. In addition, the construction of psychosocial service system has made progress during the pandemic, but there are still some deficiencies, mainly because misunderstandings of psychosocial services lead to the dilemma in practice. Therefore, this paper discusses this situation and tries to explore the optimized pathway, hopefully to help build up an efficiency psychosocial service system.

2. Method

In order to fulfil the purpose of this study, a mixed-methods approach was utilized, implementing dialectical, comparative analysis and synthetic data analysis. A comparative methodological analysis was used for analysis the difference between "social psychological service" and "mental health service". The academic dispute between the two concepts is rooted in outdated concepts and the mixed use of the two concepts in legal documents. We analysed the construction of psychosocial services in Wuhan, where the pandemic first occurred in China. Due to the misunderstanding of "psychological services", as a result, the specific measures taken by the government for the construction of psychosocial services during the pandemic were stayed at the level of mental health services, and there is no insured mechanism of psychosocial services incorporated in the legislation of the emergency management

system. The investigator used mixed methods, psychology and sociology approaches were implemented in this study, some statistical data from Central News and legal documents during the pandemic were used, and including the survey data from individual regions to address the author's point of view.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Psychosocial service not equivalent to psychological health service

"Improving the psychosocial service system" was firstly put forward in the Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China which was implemented on March 16, 2016. This Law focuses on the psychological counseling and correction for special populations; on October 18, 2017, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China — Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Modern Prosperous Society in All Results and Strive for the Great Success of Society with Chinese Characters for a New Era-Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Community Party of China, put forward that "...improving the system of public psychological services, and cultivate self-esteem, self-confidence, rationality, composure, and optimism among our people", which connects the strengthening of psychosocial service system construction with social mentality at the legal level for the first time. As "psychosocial service" is a new term, many scholars regard it as the traditional psychological health service at social level, and focus on solving individual psychological diseases and promoting individual psychological health [1]. Scholars with different views believe that psychosocial service is not a psychological health service at the individual level, but to solve social mentality and psychosocial problems [2-4]. Some other scholars believe that psychosocial service system includes not only psychological health at the individual level, but also alleviating negative social psychology at the macro level, cultivating rational and peaceful social mentality, and enhancing the feelings of acquisition, happiness and security [5].

The academic debate is attributed to the ambiguity of definitions of "psychosocial service" and "psychological health service" in Chinese normative documents. These two concepts are cross-used in the Guidance on Strengthening Psychological Health Services, which was implemented at the end of 2016. Although "psychosocial service" is mentioned 19 times in the Guidance, the content of this paper mainly focuses on individual psychological health service. In the departmental working document Pilot Work Plan for the Construction of National Psychosocial Service System issued in 2018, both the work objectives and contents are almost all focused on individual psychological health services.

During the pandemic, people's social mentality affects prevention and control process in many aspects. Social mentality is a general social attitude, emotional experience and intention held by people towards themselves and the real society. Although originating from individual psychology, and existing in the form of the whole society, social mentality, like an invisible energy field, affects the social value orientation and behaviours mode of every social member, and is closely an associate with the overall situation of national economic, political and social development. Defined at the level of social governance, psychosocial service refers to the use of psychological knowledge and technology to solve social psychological problems at the macro level, such as social mentality cultivation, social emotional counseling and other social governance problems. Good psychosocial services can cultivate good social mentality, and in turn, good social mentality plays a basic supporting role for psychosocial services. Psychological health service mainly solves individual mental health problems from pathological and medical perspectives. However, during the pandemic, people's personal psychology is generally in a state of stress, anxiety and fear. The behaviors of snapping up masks caused by group panic, and some events greatly affected by the pandemic, including bereavement, work injury, bankruptcy of enterprise, unemployment, etc., might cause sharp social problems. It can be seen that "psychosocial services" should not be limited to psychological assistance at the individual level, but solve universal social psychological problems. We should not talk about psychology only in terms of itself, but should consider institutional factors and focus on the improvement of social reality which is the basis of psychology. For example, hotel and catering industry have most affected by the pandemic, and mass unemployment occurs frequently. If the taxation of hotel and catering industry cannot be reduced or exempted, rent subsidies for stores, unemployment benefits or minimum living needs for the unemployed cannot be provided, and then it is impossible to fundamentally solve the psychological problems of these people. In short, it is difficult to solve massive psychological problems through individual psychological counseling.

3.2 Current Construction of Psychosocial Service System

The construction of psychosocial service system in China has made progress. During the pandemic, by the end of July 2021, 6 normative documents were released, the contents of which included the integration of the psychological crisis intervention into the overall deployment of pandemic prevention and control, unified leadership by local governments, establishing a team of psychological expert for technical guidance, and the execution of the health administration departments [6]. Hotlines for pandemic psychological assistance (hereinafter referred to as "psychological hotlines") have set up in various places, and each hotline has at least 2 operators, and provides 24-hour free psychological services based on the needs of the local public [7]. The service department provides psychological counseling and crisis intervention for different groups of people, which is greatly conducive to service management and effect evaluation [8]. Psychological support for key groups, such as patients with the COVID-19 and their families, families of the deceased, front-line staff, subsistence allowances, senior citizen with special needs, children, vagrant beggars, and the disabled population etc [9]. This study combines the actual situation of each community and adopts classified and graded treatment to implement classified intervention for service recipients with different communities, different age groups, different populations and different needs [10]. The Chinese Psychological Association and other social organizations have issued professional guides, such as the "Guidelines for Online Psychological Assistance Services during the Prevention and Control for the Pandemic of COVID-19", "Grading and Staged Treatment of Psychological Assistance Against Pandemics", and "Guidelines for Online Psychological Counseling Work in Special Periods of the Pandemics" etc. They also provide psychological services and scientific support for the fight against the pandemic through online psychological consultation, public lectures, and popular science articles [11]. In practice, taking Wuhan — where the pandemic situation is the most serious — as an example. Since the city was locked down, people's psychological pressure due to the pandemic suddenly increased. Wuhan deployed psychological health services in the whole city, and quickly started the psychological counseling and crisis intervention response. The city worked out a work plan, set up psychological rescue expert groups, held 20 professional and technical trainings on psychological crisis intervention and post-disaster psychological reconstruction for more than 8,000 community cadres, and distributed more than 500,000 psychological health brochures to the public [12]. There have been no personal extreme events in the cases of receiving psychological assistance and intervention. The local psychological service system was promptly developed under pandemic.

3.3 The Dilemma of Psychosocial Service

First of all, cognitive errors in psychosocial services. China's psychosocial service system is still under construction, and the current psychological service ability and levels are limited, which still stays at the level of individuals and special needs. Due to the cognitive error of psychosocial services, some local governments focus on solving individual psychological diseases and maintaining individual psychological health; underestimate the efficacy of psychosocial services in social governance, leading to delay and slack in the implementation of work. In the study, 12 areas designated by the Comprehensive Treatment of Social Management Committee Office as "psychosocial service system construction" contact points, and 10 hardware constructions of psychosocial service platforms were selected as evaluation samples. Fengtai District in Beijing only completed two projects, and Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province, Changning District in Shanghai and Ganzhou in Jiangxi Province each completed four projects, far below the expected level [13]. In addition, many people misunderstand psychosocial services and believe that only patients with mental illness need psychological services, and they associate psychology and related practitioners with "metaphysics" and "cheaters". 1,462 people were surveyed by the Questionnaire on Psychological Construction of Gansu Youth Volunteer Corps for Pandemic Prevention through the Wechat. The results demonstrate that only 107 people need psychological assistance, and most of them were reluctant to disclose their personal information. It does not mean that other respondents are in good psychological state, but that the respondents lack a correct understanding of psychology [14]. These misunderstandings make it difficult for psychosocial services to be accepted by the people.

Second: lack of detailed rules for the implementation of psychosocial services. According to the law in China's emergency management system, in dealing with the aftermath, emergency management workers should provide psychological assistance to casualties in public emergencies [15]. The emergency responds plans formulated by government departments should include the contents of psychological assistance and organize psychological assistance work. Schools should organize professionals to provide timely psychological assistance to their students. Although there are laws to

follow in psychological assistance in emergency management system, the basic contents of psychological services are not specified. Overall, the emergency respond plan only mentions psychological assistance at the individual level [16].

Third: insufficient management efficiency in public psychological service, leading to waste of resources. In practice, the administrative execution system and responsible subject of constructing psychosocial service system are still unclear. Just like the Chinese legendary “Nine Dragons Controlling Flood” [17], it seems that the construction team is huge, however, everyone has their own opinions and the division of powers and responsibilities is unclear, leading to inefficient behaviors such as selective implementation, non-cooperation and even power game among departments. In addition, the corresponding work assessment and supervision mechanism has not been fully established, which makes it difficult for different departments to collaborate. Lack of effective communication and cooperation leads to redundant construction and waste of resources. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, government departments, psychology-related societies, associations and other social organizations have cooperated to carry out various services such as psychological assistance hotlines and public webinar. As of February, 21, 2020, there have been more than 400 psychological assistance hotlines, but they lack unified management and coordination. The professionalism and service ability of hotline service are uneven, and the service quality cannot be effectively evaluated. Many people don’t know how to seek psychological assistance service through hotlines. Among the 427 hotlines surveyed, 59.5% received less than 10 calls per day, and only 5.6% received more than 60 calls per day [18]. The utilization rate of psychological service hotline needs to be improved [19].

Fourth: serious gap among psychological professionals. The success of constructing psychosocial service system is closely related to the reserve of professional talents. The construction of psychosocial service system needs a large number of psychological talents with practical experience. However, there is a big talent gap in this field. At present, there are 30 authorized institutes for doctoral degree and 68 authorized institutes for master's degree in psychology, and 99 authorized institutes for master's degree in applied psychology. Every year, about 270 doctors and 2,400 masters of psychology and 1,300 masters of applied psychology are awarded nationwide [20]. This foundation is far from meeting the psychological service needs of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people. Moreover, under the current social environment, the scope of employment for psychology professionals is very limited, and many psychologists have to find another way out, which further widens the talent gap. China has not established a qualification examination and supervision mechanism for psychological industry, organizations and institutions, so the qualification certificate of psychological counsellor is not widely recognized, and the country cancelled this certificate as early as September 2017. Therefore, the professional level of psychological counselors remains to be discussed. Besides, the operational ability of local governments to build psychosocial service system is worrying. Although the roughly training of psychological knowledge for civil servants can make them understand and master some theoretical basis, it cannot rapidly increase their practical ability. Some underdeveloped remote regions even have no economic strength to organize relevant knowledge and skills training. It is difficult for civil servants to be competent for the construction of psychosocial service system.

3.4 Way out of the Dilemma

Clarifying the organizational framework for the construction of psychosocial service system. In order to build a psychosocial service system, the responsible subject, service objects and service contents should be clarified. First of all, old concept should be broken down. The psychosocial service system should serve all the people to solve mass and negative psychosocial problems in the social changes, instead of carrying out psychological health consultation for individuals. Therefore, the responsible subject of the psychosocial service system can only be the local government, and the service objects are all citizens. In order to provide accurate services, specific groups, such as rural remote groups, urban groups bereaved of the only child, severely impoverished groups, disabled groups, etc., can be focused on and given the priority to. Governments can carry out extensive publicity, hire psychologists to spread psychological service knowledge, and promote on a large scale with the help of emerging social media platforms like Wechat and Tiktok, to help people understand the value and significance of psychology. The all-inclusive psychosocial service system consists of psychosocial detection system, psychosocial guidance system, psychosocial health system, social crisis and emergency respond system. As one of the core contents of the social governance system, the psychosocial service system applies the psychological achievements in the past century to social governance, and perfectly combine the applied psychology system with the social governance practice in both directions.

The state improves the legal system for emergency management and incorporates social psychological services into the legal and regulatory framework for emergency management. China has no relevant legislation on psychosocial service guarantee in emergency management, so the country should speed up the revision of emergency management laws and regulations. In the legislative content, the competent department of psychological service for emergency management, the organization of psychological assistance and the construction of psychological service team and the working mechanism of psychological service both at individual and social levels should be clearly defined. The principle of developing psychological service by grading and classification, and paying equal attention to short-term intervention and long-term service should be followed. The monitoring and early warning of people's risk perception should be contained in emergency monitoring and early warning; the psychological crisis intervention for people directly affected by disasters should be included in emergency response and rescue; and individual long-term psychological assistance and social psychological services for groups should be incorporated into post-event recovery and reconstruction plans. The means of legal transplantation may be taken into consideration. The laws of countries with relatively complete legal system of emergency management, such as the United States, Germany and Japan, can be referred to. Psychosocial service guarantee law should be established to further enrich the contents of the provisions in practice.

The service department conducts departmental collaboration, applies big data technology to optimize management, and establishes a performance assessment mechanism. To build an organic and efficient psychosocial service system, the government, professional organizations and social forces should cooperate and exchange so as to advance joint construction and sharing. It is suggested that the central government should set up an overall planning department, which is responsible for formulating policies, coordinating cooperation among all departments, establishing expert research teams, guiding local practice, and undertaking the assessment and evaluation responsibilities for the construction of local psychosocial service system. All cities, counties and districts should establish work leading groups at corresponding levels, and the members should be composed of responsible personnel of government departments. Regular leadership meetings should be held to coordinate and solve key and difficult problems in the construction of psychosocial service system. The third-party assessment agencies should be introduced to take regular inspection on the assessment of construction, and the awareness rate, preference rate and satisfaction rate of the masses should be taken as indicators to evaluate the effect of the system. Big data technology should be used to establish an intelligent public opinion monitoring and psychosocial early warning system, so as to establish a long-term mechanism in technology research and development, platform support, data sharing and privacy protection. Existing detection systems scattered in different departments should be integrated and re-inform into different early warning levels aiming to formulate differentiated plans according to different levels so as to implement departmental connection and multiple channels to help emergency management work can be carried out comprehensively and deeply.

Actively training professional talents and improving the professional level of service personnel. As the responsible subjects of constructing psychosocial service system, the government can improve its professional ability by strengthening the psychological knowledge and skills training of civil servants, and recruit professionals with psychological background as civil servants or adopt the mode of external experts to improve competence of all departments in routine psychosocial services. The county should introduce a standardized professional title certification system as soon as possible, improve the certification channels of psychosocial service professionals, and ensure the professional level of "psychosocial service providers". Colleges and universities should consider setting up psychosocial service majors and pay attention to the training of students' practical ability. The boundaries of disciplines should be broken so as to promote exchanges and cooperation in psychology, sociology, management and pedagogy. Cooperation between scientific research institutes and the government should be strengthened to promote the organic combination of academic research and practices. Scientific research institutes should assist the government to improve the quality of psychosocial service system construction. The market should fully play its role. In addition, non-governmental social work organizations and non-profit organizations should be encouraged to cooperate with communities, villages, enterprises and schools to carry out professional psychosocial services, and integrate psychosocial services into all social groups. The market supply and demand matching should be promoted.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the issue of the construction of China's psychosocial services during the

pandemic and considers relative questions. The initial phase of the analysis of these complicated problems needs a clearer conception of the term ‘psychosocial services’ as both a psychology and sociology category. The current theoretical circles have not reached common ground on questions relating to “psychosocial services”. Psychosocial services are not equivalent to mental health services. Misunderstanding of psychosocial services as mental health services can cause serious adverse consequences. In order to get out of the predicament, four things must be done: clarifying the organizational framework for the construction of psychosocial service system; improving the legal system of emergency management and incorporating psychosocial services into the legal and regulatory system of emergency management; carrying out departmental collaboration, using big data technology to optimize management, and establish a performance evaluation mechanism; Promptly training professional talents and improving the professional level of provider.

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