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Understanding Political Scandals Using a Social Representations Approach: The Case of the Philippine Priority Development Assistance Fund Scam

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The study puts forward the use of Social Representations Theory in investigating Filipinos' shared understanding of the scandal surrounding the Philippine legislators' Priority Development Assistance Fund. Employing the word association technique, 151 Filipinos who were familiar with the event wrote down the social meanings they associated with the fund scam. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and hierarchical evocation method (Abric, 2012). Respondents' core understanding of the scam depicted the issue as a story of corruption, which was orchestrated by Janet Lim-Napoles. On the other hand, the respondents' peripheral apprehension centered on depicting the scandal as one that involved the government and some corrupt legislators. Hence, the pork barrel scam was viewed as a form of injustice that pointed to the greed and insincerity of the legislators involved, and the kind of system the Philippine government had. Because of the scandal, Filipinos had felt enraged and betrayed, and were then calling for genuine change in the system. Moreover, the pork barrel scam was largely associated with Lim-Napoles, and the implicated legislators were likened to *baboy* (swine). In sum, findings point to the potency of the Social Representations Theory in investigating political scandals, such as the pork barrel scam.

Keywords: Social Representation Theory, Philippine Pork Barrel Scam, Political Scandal, Hierarchical Evocation Method

The highly publicized Philippine legislators' pork barrel scam shocked the country in 2013. The incident triggered public and private discourses, stirred up strong emotions, and led to political consequences.

However, political scandals, such as this, are not new as they have always existed and have been salient in the area of politics (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004; Thompson, 2000).

A scandal is a social phenomenon whereby a transgression is committed, serious enough to evoke a public response when disclosed and endanger the reputation of the individuals involved (Thompson, 2000). Oftentimes implicating a political figure, political scandals usually revolve around sex, money, and power (Thompson, 2000; Thompson, 2005). Extant literature on political scandal points to people's reactions to this social phenomenon (see Lee, 2015), their perceptions of politicians involved in scandals (see Brenton, 2011), and the impact of political scandals on how politicians are judged (see Bhatti, et al., 2013) during elections (Long, 2019) by the electorate (Sikorski et al., 2019). Not enough studies, however, have looked at how a political scandal is socially understood by the public and how it is being talked about in the public space. To bridge this gap, this study thus captured Filipino citizens' socially shared understanding of the Philippine pork barrel scam which was a political scandal that rocked the Philippine society in 2013.

In the next section, I first detail a review of findings of some studies on political scandals and of specific political scandals that have taken place in various parts of the globe. To put my study in context, since political scandals are culture and time-bound, I then provide a brief background of one of the most shocking political scandals in the Philippines which is the 2013 pork barrel scam. Then, I discuss the lens through which I captured the fruit of the public social thinking and collective feelings surrounding this scandal.

Political Scandal: An Overview

Political scandals spell great drama, and they are a powerful component of public discourse (Pawelczyk, 2014). As such, these social phenomena are not only tackled in public and private conversations but are also discussed in and communicated through mass media. In the end, these public scandals provide information which can form basis for societal decisions and opinions (von Sikorski et al., 2019; Pawelczyk, 2014).

The media cover political scandals mostly through news reports, editorial articles, or cartoons (e.g., von Sikorski, 2018; Wiid, et al., 2011). In

many instances, newspapers that are strong supporters of certain political parties intensely report scandals that involve politicians belonging to an opposing party while only lightly covering scandals that implicate politicians who belong to the party they support (Galvis et al., 2016). For instance, Puglisi and Snyder, Jr. (2011) found that newspapers that were partial to the democratic party tended to have more coverage on scandals implicating republican politicians than those involving democratic politicians. Meanwhile, newspapers endorsing republicans were disposed to doing otherwise.

The assessment of political norm transgressions as either careless indiscretion or deliberate trickery hinges partly on people's prior political attitudes (Lee, 2014) as well as on their prior levels of cynicism (Dancey, 2012). Wrongdoings that involve illegal conducts are viewed with leniency while those that point to neglect of legislative obligations are mostly evaluated negatively (Bhatti et al., 2013). Scandals implicating legislators adversely influence the public's attitudes towards political institutions and processes (Bowler & Karp, 2004). Thus, the public's assessment of the response of implicated officials are based on the larger society's perception of the factuality and acceptability of the scandal. This evaluation of factuality and acceptability influences people's estimation of the public officials (Lee, 2014). On the aftermath of a political scandal, politicians generally receive negative evaluations (van Sikorski, 2018), which could lead to unfavorable consequences. Long (2019), for instance, found that senators who were facing a scandal while seeking reelection sustained a decrease in the popular votes, especially when they were linked to issues of political wrongdoings, financial misconduct, and controversial statements. However, politicians who gave positive justifications for their behavior or declared their involvement in the scandal to be untrue were able to lessen the negative impact of the scandal, to some extent (Brenton, 2011). Moreover, when confronted with scandalous information about their favored political candidate or officeholder, avid political supporters would often engage in motivated reasoning in order to preserve or strengthen their candidate's image and reputation (von Sikorski et al., 2019). It is also interesting to note that voters did not demonstrate gender bias in their appraisal (Bhatti et al., 2013). Specifically, it was found that female politicians ensnared in a scandal were no more disadvantaged than their male counterparts (Brenton, 2011).

Political Scandals Around the Globe: A Quick Peek

Political scandals have become a frequently occurring social phenomenon as various politicians are getting involved in events related to abuse of power, sexual affairs, and financial misdeeds (Ekstrom & Johansson, 2008). An example is the wiretapping scandal that involved President Francois Mitterrand of France (Trueheart, 1997), and this parallels the Watergate surveillance scandal that implicated US President Richard Nixon who was consequently forced to resign (Feldstein, 2004). There was also the Iran-Contra affair in which the administration of US President Ronald Reagan was embroiled in the controversy of covertly assisting the sale of arms to Iran in order to free American hostages in Lebanon and use the proceeds to financially support the rebel group, Contras, that was involved in an armed conflict in the Nicaragua (Waxman, 2019). Recently, Korea saw the ousting of its first female president, Park Geun-hye, who was charged of bribery, abuse of state power, and leakage of classified state information (“South Korea’s Presidential,” 2018).

Besides wiretapping, secret arms deals, and abuse of power, political leaders also get involved in sex scandals, such as the one that entangled US President Bill Clinton with former White House intern, Monica Lewinsky (Waxman & Fabry, 2018). Moreover, British Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, was implicated in an issue with the young model, Christine Keeler (Farmer, 2016). The scandal cost Clinton a fine of USD25,000 and a 5-year suspension of his lawyer’s license (“Bill Clinton Can,” 2006). Profumo, on the other hand, later resigned from the Parliament (Farmer, 2016).

Political scandals are also associated with illegal use of financial resources and corruption among political leaders. For instance, in 2009, members of the British Parliament were tossed into media headlines when their widespread abuse and illegal misuse of the parliamentary allowances were revealed. This led many of the members to leave their posts (Hechinger, 2012). In 1992, Italy uncovered and exposed Tangentopoli, a system of corruption implicating many of Italy’s political leaders. This led to arrests and suicides of several politicians, and to the end of the Italian Socialist Party and the Christian Democracy Party (Giglioli, 1996). In 2004, senior government officials running the Sponsorship Program in Canada were charged for their misuse of public funds. Specifically, commissions were paid

to communication agencies, but the source of funding and the content of the transactions were concealed (“Auditor General’s Report,” 2004).

In the Philippines, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was involved in electoral fraud, known as the “Hello Garci” scandal, during the 2004 national elections (“Hello Garci Scandal,” 2008). This issue was on top of the fertilizer fund scam where President Arroyo’s agriculture secretary was accused of diverting millions of fertilizer funds to the president’s election campaign that year (‘Fertilizer Fund Scam,’ 2016). In 2000, President Joseph Estrada was also embroiled in the *Juetengate* scandal for receiving *jueteng* payoffs and bribes. *Jueteng* is a numbers game that is popular in the country, but it is also considered as an illegal form of gambling. This scandal eventually led to Estrada’s impeachment from office (Finin, 2000; Rood, 2019). Furthermore, several members of the senate and congress were ensnared in a corruption scandal in 2013. I give more details about this in the next section.

Political Scandal in the Philippines: The Pork Barrel Scam

On July 12, 2013, the Filipino people were stunned by the news about what was touted as the biggest corruption scandal under the administration of former President Simeon Benigno Aquino III. The issue was made known to the public when the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI), one of the leading newspapers in the country, published a special report on the allegation that a certain businesswoman named Janet Lim-Napoles had been channeling some 10 billion pesos from government funds into ghost projects over the past 10 years (Carvajal, 2013a).

The funds were allegedly sourced from the pork barrel of some lawmakers or legislators of the country--both from the Senate and the House of Representatives (Carvajal, 2013b). Pork barrel is also known as Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF). This discretionary fund allows the lawmakers to financially support small-scale infrastructures or community projects for their constituents (Diaz, 2013).

The PDI report alleged that, based on affidavits submitted to the National Bureau of Investigations, some legislators used their pork barrel funds to support ghost projects whose identified beneficiaries were the fake Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) created by Lim-Napoles (Carvajal, 2013b). The lawmakers, accordingly, would get a commission based on a

40-60% sharing of the project funds. The rest of the amount would go to Lim-Napoles (Carvajal, 2013a), as there were no real project beneficiaries (Carvajal, 2013c). However, there were times when actual “deliveries” or benefits were coursed through legitimate projects, but these would cost only a small amount. The bulk of the budget would go to the pockets of the legislators and Lim-Napoles (Burgonio & Carvajal, 2013).

When the issue erupted, Lim-Napoles (Ager, 2013; Carvajal, 2013d) and the lawmakers vehemently denied the said allegations (Carvajal & Avendano, 2013; Sabillo & Ager, 2013). However, one month after the news exploded, the Philippine Commission on Audit released a comprehensive report revealing that between 2007 and 2009, six billion pesos of lawmakers’ pork barrel funds went to dubious non-government organizations including those linked to Lim-Napoles. However, the intended beneficiaries of the funds denied receiving the goods claimed to be funded by the pork barrel or PDAF (Carvajal & Avendano, 2013).

Amid public uproar on the PDAF issue, parallel investigations were conducted by the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee (Bordadora, 2013) and the Inter-agency Anti-Graft Coordinating Council to probe the misuse of the pork barrel funds (Lapena & Meruenas, 2013). As a result, many Filipinos were enraged by the news about the scam (Badoy, 2013; Royandoyan, 2013). Protesters gathered at Manila’s Rizal Park to call for the abolition of the pork barrel and the prosecution of those involved in the scandal (Mangosing et al., 2013). Prompted by a growing public outrage, the Philippine Supreme Court stopped the release of the remaining PDAF allocations, and two months later declared the PDAF as unconstitutional (Torres-Tupas, 2013).

After seven months of investigation and gathering of evidence, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Senate Blue Ribbon panel announced the findings of their separate investigations on the pork barrel scam. Both investigating bodies found reason to hold Lim-Napoles as well as three senators and other government employees liable for committing plunder (Avendano & Balana, 2014; Balana, 2014). Having found a probable cause, the Office of the Ombudsman formally filed plunder charges against the officials tagged in the pork barrel scam (Cabacungan & Burgonio, 2014; Cayabyab, 2014).

To capture the public’s shared understanding of this political scandal, I propose the use of Social Representations Theory as theoretical lens. In the next section, I outline how the theory proves valuable in understanding how

a specific political scandal is socially understood in the public sphere by a thinking society.

Investigating Political Scandal through the Lens of Social Representations Theory

Social Representations Theory is a theory of social knowledge that looks into how group members think, feel, and act about a particular social object (Wagner et al., 1999), such as the pork barrel scam. Social representation, thus, refers to the system of knowledge that enables members of a group to understand social phenomena, and to communicate and act within their social milieu (Moscovici, 1988). Thus, social representations refer to the knowledge, symbols, and emotions shared by a group (Wagner, 1995), and such representations are articulated in the verbal and overt behavior of group members. This behavior constitutes an object for the group (Wagner et al., 1999). Moreover, social representation is also a group's shared understanding (Joffe, 2003) of certain phenomena that are socially relevant to them (Wagner et al., 1995), such as a political scandal. Such understanding may come in the form of an icon, image, or metaphor (Wagner & Hayes, 2005) which is created in the daily interactions (Moscovici, 1988) and elaboration of social groups. This process of creating an image to symbolize a social object or of turning the abstract into something concrete is called objectification (Abric, 1996). Social representation is, thus, a product of social thinking (Philogene & Deaux, 2001) and resides across the minds of the co-acting individuals (Wagner, et al., 1999).

Making representations social. It is through the process of interaction and communication that a group's understanding of a social issue is formed and transformed (Moscovici, 1988; Wagner et al., 1999). As such, it is during conversations with friends, colleagues, and neighbors about the pork barrel scam that people are able to create a shared understanding of the issue. As Social Representations Theory focuses on common-sense knowledge regarding a society's everyday issue, this theory, thus, highlights lay interpretations of reality (Moscovici, 1988). Social representations of the pork barrel scam, thus, reflects common people's shared understanding of this social object, their feelings and attitude towards it, as well as their explanation about it (Echabe, et al., 1994; Wagner, et al., 1999).

Social representations may be hegemonic, polemical, or emancipated (Moscovici, 1988). Hegemonic representations are those that are shared by most members of a group, indicating that they are of the same opinion concerning a social object such as a fraudulent act. Polemical representations, on the other hand, are representations that are contentious or are opposing or being disputed by members of a group (Ben-Asher, 2003). For instance, one group may find the whistle-blowers of a scandal as courageous and admirable for bravely telling the world about the scandal despite the dangers and risks whistle-blowing poses. However, some people may find whistle-blowers as deplorable as the latter are actually guilty of committing an unlawful act and are only trying to save themselves from people's wrath by divulging what they know about the issue and finger pointing at other people involved. Emancipated representations are those that may vary from yet complement one another (Moscovici, 1988).

Emotions as social representations. Strong group emotions emerge along with events that are contentious, hostile, or scandalous (see Bar-Tal, 2005; Christie, 2001; Sen & Wagner, 2005). Thus, this suggests that events or issues in society, such as a public revelation of a ten-year, ten-billion-fund scam, can trigger intense emotions among people. As part of their collective symbolic coping, people would want to come to grips with those emotions. As Joffe (2003) has asserted, social representations are shaped in line with people's concerns, which are oftentimes emotion-driven.

The Social Representations Theory, thus, allows for the integration of affective and symbolic processes into one social representation (Rey, 2006). This theory also recognizes that affective factors influence how the contents of thoughts are formulated (Jodelet, 2006). Moreover, Social Representations Theory understands that a group's representation of a social object is not purely cognitive but is affective as well (see Sen & wagner, 2005), for the process of knowing involves the desire to know or the desire not to know as well as feelings towards the object of knowledge and the act of knowledge. Representing something is not the bland production of a cognitive map, but rather it is an act of people who have thoughts, feelings, motives, and identity, and who live in a social world (Jovchelovitch, 2002). The theory delves into how people's daily talk gradually develops in order for them to manage socially and emotionally-charged experiences (Contarello et al., 2007).

Structure of social representations. Jean Claude Abric (1993) has stated that social representations are both rigid and flexible. They are consensual yet are characterized by strong interindividual dissimilarity. These contradictions, according to him, can be traced back to a representation's structure — the central core and the peripheral elements. The central core is a representation's chief element (Abric, 1996) that is oftentimes non-negotiable and rigid, and remains stable across time (Abric, 2012). Peripheral elements, on the other hand, are those components of a representation that are flexible, bears contradiction, are sensitive to the immediate context (Abric, 1993), and allows interindividual differences within the representation (Abric, 1996). For instance, permanently seeing politicians who have been involved in political scandals as untrustworthy may be central to the understanding of political scandal, while being forgiving to some forms of political scandal and not to other forms may be peripheral to the meaning constructed around this social phenomenon.

According to Abric (2001, 2012), the central core is often evoked frequently and promptly, while peripheral elements may be brought to mind less recurrently and less immediately. As such, he proposes the use of hierarchical evocation method or HEM to capture these structures, cross-measuring frequency and immediacy of evocation. I give further details on HEM in the method section.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to capture the social representation or shared understanding about the pork barrel scam. Employing Abric's (2001) hierarchical evocation method, this paper also endeavors to present the structure of this representation by unveiling the central core and the peripheral elements.

METHOD

To achieve the research objectives, I utilized both qualitative approach and hierarchical evocation method. In this section, I elaborate on the participants, the data corpus, the procedure for gathering data, and the analysis used in the study.

Participants

One hundred fifty-one (151) Filipinos, aged 16 to 28 ($M=19$, $SD=1.81$) answered the study's qualitative survey questionnaire. Most of them were female, comprising 72% of the sample while the remaining 28% were male. The respondents came from various parts of the country, namely, Palawan, Negros, Iloilo, Capi, Antique, Cebu, Bohol, Zamboanga, and Davao. In terms of selection criteria, knowledge about the pork barrel scam was the main criterion for selecting the respondents of the study. In other words, the respondents were not randomly selected but were requested to participate because they knew about the pork barrel scam. Therefore, they could share their thoughts about the scandal as this could be one of the frequent topics of their day-to-day conversations.

Data Corpus, Data Gathering Procedure, and Data Analysis

Using a free association technique, I asked the respondents to write their first three ideas regarding the pork barrel scam. There were no limits to the number of words they could write and the amount of time given to them. They were also made to use the language they were most comfortable with. Their answers, which amounted to 411 utterances, served as the data/evocation corpus of the study. The generated data were subjected to both thematic analysis and hierarchical evocation method of analysis.

Data in this study were gathered at the height of the pork barrel scam investigation, long before the indictment of those linked to the scam. Data gathered were first subjected to a qualitative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Ritchie et al., 2003), which was data driven. Specifically, I went over the data several times and coded them without a pre-existing framework. However, I paid close attention to cognitive and affective representations that emerged from the data. Then, I searched for and aptly labelled recurrent themes from among the generated codes.

After the thematic analysis, I applied the hierarchical evocation method, following the steps proposed by Abric (2012). The method was applied in order to determine the structure of the social representations gleaned from the data, and identify the components of the central core and the peripheral elements of the pre-determined structure. The data or the

evocation corpus were reduced to nine themes, based on the results of the thematic analysis. Then, I searched for the social representations structure by associating the themes with two main criteria, namely, the frequency of occurrence and the order of evocation of the themes in each category (see Baquiano & Mendez, 2016; Montiel et al., 2012; Roland-Levy et al., 2010; Sarrica & Wachelke, 2010; Wachelke, 2008). I cross-referenced the two criteria to produce a four-area chart. The upper left quadrant of the chart was the zone of central core while the lower left quadrant was the zone of contrasted elements. The upper and lower right quadrants, on the other hand, were the area for first and second peripheries, respectively. Themes that were evoked more frequently and more promptly were salient and, thus, belonged to the central core. Themes that were more promptly but less frequently evoked were regarded as contrasted elements. Moreover, themes that were frequently yet less promptly evoked were considered as elements of the first periphery, while those that were evoked less frequently and less promptly were classified as elements of the second periphery.

I requested the participation of two fellow qualitative researchers. One of them, who had done Social Representations studies, checked the data to ensure validity. We discussed our findings after our individual qualitative data analysis. Our analyses and discussion yielded similar findings and, thus, interpretation agreement was achieved across data.

RESULTS

I divide the results section into two parts. In Part 1, I detail the findings of the qualitative analysis. In Part 2, I present the results of the hierarchical evocation method employed.

Part 1. Shared Understanding of the Pork Barrel Scam

Thematic analysis of the data brought about eight major themes categorizing the respondents' social understanding of the pork barrel scam. Specifically, the respondents socially understood the pork barrel scam as a scandal, as a story of corruption, as a reflection of the kind of government the Philippines had, as a mark of greed and insincerity of the legislators' involved, as a form of injustice, as a source of negative emotions, and as

an orchestra of various key players. The analysis also revealed images that the respondents used in symbolizing their shared knowledge of the pork barrel scam.

Pork Barrel Scam as a Scandal

The social issue concerning the fraudulent act of some Philippine legislators, of Janet Lim-Napoles, and of other people involved in the pork barrel scam was understood by the respondents as a serious misconduct that exposed the dirty politics in the Philippines. Labelled by the respondents as a “Billion Peso Scam,” the pork barrel scandal was a big and complicated scandal that involved people’s money and humiliated some politicians. The respondents referred to the scandal as a shameful act and a crime against the government itself, against God, and against the Filipino people. The scandal was regarded by the respondents as a cause of conflict in the country at the time and, thus, was another *gubot* (mess or problem) that the government had to face and address.

Pork Barrel Scam as a Story of Corruption

From the point of view of the respondents, the scandal surrounding the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) or commonly known as the pork barrel scam was a story of corruption. According to them, billions of pesos owned by the Filipino people, (i.e., government funds coming from the taxpayers) were being used illegally by government officials who were abusing their power. The respondents were aware that money which goes to the *pondo ng pamahalaan* (government fund) and is considered as *pera ng bayan* (people’s money) was to be utilized to fund projects such as construction of roads and other infrastructures, livelihood programs in various communities, and scholarships for the youth in order to benefit the Filipino people. However, according to the respondents, the money had been wasted on phantom projects that benefited ghost or non-existing beneficiaries. This unscrupulous system was orchestrated by Janet Lim-Napoles mainly through creating fake non-government organizations (NGOs) and applying them as recipients of the PDAF funded projects.

Moreover, the respondents were also cognizant that the lawmakers involved manipulated the projects in a seemingly legal manner so that they

could exploit people's money for their personal gains. It appears that they treated PDAF as their own personal budget. Thus, to the respondents, the pork barrel scam was a misuse of people's money (*"hindi paggamit ng pera ng taong bayan sa wastong paraan"*). Worse, the hard-earned money of the common people was being utilized to make those who were in power become rich (*"ginamit ang perang pinaghirapan ng mamamayan upang yumaman ang mga makapangyarihan"*).

Moreover, the respondents described the pork barrel scam as a devious scheme, a criminal act, an anomaly within the government, and *pagpanikas* or *pagpanlimbong* (act of cheating). They described it as *pagnanakaw* or *pagpangawat* or stealing taxpayers' money and deceiving these taxpayers in the process. In other words, the political leaders, particularly the legislators, were the ones who duped out the very people they promised to serve. As one respondent put it, the scam was an act of *"pagloko ng gobyerno sa mga tao"* (the government deceiving the people).

Pork Barrel Scam as a Reflection of the Kind of Government in the Philippines

As perceived by the respondents, the pork barrel scam was a reflection of the kind of government that the Philippines had: incompetent, inefficient, dirty, imperfect, and irresponsible as evident in how politicians involved in the scam finger-pointed on others and washed their hands of the issue. According to the respondents, the government was incompetent because it was not able to promptly discern the fraudulent act due to lack or absence of proper auditing, especially of the large amounts of money used to fund government projects. Such blunder also reflected the government's inefficiency in delivering its services.

Furthermore, the respondents also believed that the pork barrel scam, being the scandal that it was, exposed the dirty politics at work in the country as well as the anomalies in the sovereign state. The scandal also uncovered the malignant and systemic corruption in the government. Moreover, the government was placed in a bad light, and the Aquino administration blamed such negative image on the leadership of the former president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. As one respondent put it, "the Aquino administration is not perfect."

The scam, according to the respondents, also revealed how unprincipled government leaders/legislators were. Despite the awareness that their actions would make the Filipinos suffer, these political leaders continued with their wrongdoing while blatantly denying it at the same time.

Pork Barrel Scam as a Mark of Legislators' Greed and Insincerity

The respondents also expressed that the act of the people involved in the scam, particularly the lawmakers, was a mark of their greed, dishonesty, deceitfulness, and insincerity as public servants. The respondents said that those who were in power only thought of their own welfare and not of the people's welfare. They also described the politicians as *makasarili* or selfish and hungry for more money--people's money, that is--but did not have the passion to serve their constituents.

The respondents believed that people in power, particularly the legislators involved in the scam, were hypocrites. They presented themselves as the good guys who had programs intended for the poor, but they were actually using their position and authority as smokescreen to conceal their criminal acts of stealing and corruption. Therefore, the respondents likened these legislators to thieves and *baboy* (swine), and described them as dishonest and lacking in principles.

Pork Barrel Scam as an Injustice to the Filipinos

The respondents of the study perceived the fund scam as an injustice to the Filipinos, especially the poor. They reckoned that pocketing government funds in the guise of projects which did not actually exist was totally unfair. Worse, all these had led to underserved outcomes.

How did the scam affect the Filipinos? What were its consequences? According to the respondents of the study, the PDAF or pork barrel scam was a social issue that affected the people in many ways, and Filipinos should be concerned about these effects. The criminal act of the legislators meant "eternal suffering for the poor." The scam, apparently, had been going on for years already. This means that the Filipino people had been defrauded by the government officials, particularly lawmakers, across time. It is no wonder then that social services such as health services and education services had

been below par. Even the infrastructures in the country were substandard or inferior in quality. Some of the respondents also expressed that due to the scam, their own scholarships would be terminated.

The respondents believed that due to the unlawful use of legislators' pork barrel funds, the poor had become even poorer while the rich ones, especially those involved in the scam, had become richer. The respondents were also convinced that this situation could lead to more taxes for the people, and thus, *makadugang na pud sa kalisud* (adds to the [people's] suffering).

Pork Barrel Scam as a Source of Negative Feelings

As viewed by the respondents of the study, the pork barrel scam had ignited a range of negative emotions among Filipinos. They said that the Filipinos felt extremely angry, disgusted, and betrayed by their very own leaders—emotions that the respondents themselves had felt. For example, one of them said, “*Maglagot ko makadungog ana kay daghan ang nadamay, lalo na katong mga scholars*” (I get mad hearing about it [pork barrel scam] as many innocent people had been affected, especially the scholars). Another respondent described the scam as *kailinit*, while one of them emphasized that the whole thing was *uluglasan* which meant that they felt infuriated by the mere thought of the issue.

Furthermore, the respondents believed that the Filipinos were displeased and felt a sense of betrayal especially that the political candidates whom they had voted for and trusted were the very ones who deceived and double-crossed the unsuspecting common *tao* (people). For the respondents, this act was extremely unfair. Thus, these Filipinos (i.e., the respondents) were convinced that it was high time that the system be changed. According to them, this need for change was precisely the reason why people went out on the streets to protest and demand that the PDAF be abolished. Thus, the respondents believed that there should be a move towards structural reforms and genuine social change.

Pork Barrel Scam Key Players

In the eyes of these Filipinos (i.e., the respondents), the key player of the whole pork barrel scam was the government, particularly the Aquino

administration and President Benigno Simeon Aquino III himself, as well as the involved legislators such as Bong Revilla, Jinggoy Estrada, and Juan Ponce Enrile, whom the respondents alluded to as the “fat-bellied senators.” Other critical players of the pork barrel scam, according to the respondents, were Janet Lim-Napoles and her fake NGOs. Napoles had been touted as the pork barrel queen and the mastermind of the scam.

As perceived by the respondents, the government played a key role in the scam because it was not able to immediately spot the unlawful act, but rather, simply allowed corruption in the system to continue. It was during the administration of President Aquino that the scam was unearthed, but he did not do much to address the issue. Instead, he kept blaming the issue on the past administration. Moreover, the real damage was done by the legislators who were involved in the unscrupulous activities and cheated their constituents. These politicians, according to the respondents, were the ones who stole the money from the government and from the people. The counterfeit NGOs also played a key role in the scam because it was through these NGOs that the corrupted funds were channeled. The last but not the least key player was Janet Lim Napoles, who, according to the respondents of the study, was the one who planned and directed the ingenious scheme.

Images of the pork barrel scam. The data generated two very distinct images that the respondents associated with the scandal. Specifically, the PDAF or pork barrel scam was extraordinarily linked to Janet Lim-Napoles, and the legislators involved in the fraudulent activity were depicted as *baboy* (swine).

Pork barrel scam as Janet Lim-Napoles. The pork barrel scam was vastly associated with Janet Lim-Napoles such that if one thinks of the fund scam one immediately pictures out Janet Lim-Napoles. As one respondent put it, whenever the pork barrel scam was mentioned, “the very first thing that comes to [my] mind is Janet Napoles.” Napoles was also labelled by one respondent as the queen of the pork barrel scam and by another one as the mastermind of the scam.

Scammers as *baboy* (swine). The respondents of the study referred to those politicians who, according to them, were guilty of corruption as *baboy* or swine. In the Philippines, swines are pictured as “fat-bellied” that do nothing all day but eat and sleep, and expect to simply get and/or receive from others. *Baboy* may also be used in the Philippine context when alluding

to someone who is lazy or dirty, or to someone who has a negative image for doing something unscrupulous. In the context of the issue at hand, the image of the swine was used to symbolize those legislators who were proven guilty of corruption through their involvement in the pork barrel scam. The legislators specifically were Senators Ramon Bong Revilla, Jr., Jinggoy Estrada, and Juan Ponce Enrile.

Part 2. Structure of Pork Barrel Scam Social Representations

The themes discussed above were used in the next round of analysis which utilized the hierarchical evocation method in order to uncover the central core and peripheral elements of the social representations of the pork barrel scam. It should be noted that here, the key players—Janet Lim-Napoles, the Philippine government, and the legislators involved in the scam—were not categorized under one theme but under three separate themes. Table 1 (see Appendix A) shows the structure of the shared understanding of the scandal surrounding the legislators' pork barrel, while Table 2 (see Appendix B) presents examples of words used by the respondents and the frequency of use of these words.

Core meanings of the pork barrel scam. The core shared understanding of the pork barrel scam among the respondents of the study was that the fund scandal was a story of corruption — corruption of the PDAF, which was supposed to be allotted for projects that would benefit the nation. Due to the scam, a considerable amount of government funds which came from the taxes were missing or could not be used as intended as there were no actual projects and beneficiaries. However, through the orchestration of Janet Lim-Napoles, the Filipinos were presented with what appeared to be “legal” projects, which were actually non-existent. The funds allotted to these projects were pocketed by the legislators and Napoles herself.

The quadrant of the central core, as shown in Table 1, has the following themes: pork barrel scam as a story of corruption ($f=249$, $AEO=1.74$) and as masterminded by Janet Lim-Napoles ($f=45$, $AEO=1.96$). These were the salient themes. As such, these themes were the most recurrent ones as they were mentioned frequently and promptly by the respondents.

Peripheral understanding of the pork barrel scam. The respondents of the study also perceived the pork barrel scam as a scandal or a serious

wrongdoing committed not just by Janet Lim-Napoles but also by the (corrupt) legislators involved in the scam. This scam was blamed on the Philippine government, which was described by the respondents as inefficient, incompetent, and corrupt. The scam was also understood as a cause of injustice to the Filipinos, who were deceived by their very own legislators. Calling the legislators thieves, the respondents therefore, described these legislators as greedy and insincere. All these caused the Filipino people to feel enraged and demand for genuine structural reforms.

Taking a closer look Table 1 (see Appendix A), one can see that there were no peripheral social representations that belonged to the quadrants of contested elements and of the first periphery. The rest of the themes were all grouped together in the quadrant of the second periphery. Specifically, the categories, namely, (corrupt) legislators ($f=37$, $AEO=2.14$) and Philippine government ($f=17$, $AEO=2.47$), were among the identified key players of the fund scam. Moreover, the pork barrel scam was perceived as a scandal ($f=25$, $AEO=2.16$), a form of injustice to the Filipino people ($f=25$, $AEO=2.40$), a reflection of the kind of government the Philippines had ($f=16$, $AEO=2.19$), a mark of the legislators' greed and insincerity ($f=15$, $AEO=2.27$), and a source of negative emotions such as outrage ($f=9$, $AEO=2.22$) among people. It appears that the last few themes were the least important to the respondents as these were not constantly evoked; if they were, they were elicited last, in most cases.

DISCUSSION

Results of the study pointed to seven themes representing how the fraudulent scheme on Philippine lawmakers' PDAF was socially comprehended by the respondents of the study. The core understanding of the scam revolved around a story of corruption orchestrated by Janet Lim-Napoles. The respondents' peripheral apprehension of the PDAF scandal showed that the respondents were aware of the involvement of the government and some (corrupt) legislators. This scandal was seen as a form of injustice, thus pointing to the legislator's greed and insincerity, and the kind of system the Philippine government had. Because of this scandal, Filipinos felt inflamed and betrayed, and therefore demanded for a genuine change in the system. The respondents also heavily associated the pork barrel scam with Lim-

Napoles, and they likened the implicated lawmakers to *baboy* (swine). I now discuss how I make sense of my findings by elucidating the study's theoretical and practical implications. I end this section with a roadmap for future research concerning political scandals and the pork barrel scam.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Findings of the study show that Social Representations Theory is able to aptly capture this group of Filipinos' (i.e., the respondents) ideas, feelings, attitudes, and explanations of the issue surrounding the pork barrel scam. Their understanding of this political scandal can be described as hegemonic, which means that the respondents had no contentious understanding about the scandal. For instance, seeing the scam as a form of corruption orchestrated by Janet Lim-Napoles was common among the respondents. The findings also pointed to social representations as something that was not only cognitive but affective as well. For example, the pork barrel scam evoked anger, disgust, and a sense of betrayal among Filipinos and among the respondents themselves. This suggests that strong emotions may surface during political scandals and such emotions, according to Jodelet (2006), can potentially influence the construction of the contents of people's thoughts.

The respondents' social representations of political scandal clearly reflected their shared beliefs, values, and attitudes. For instance, the respondents viewed the fund scam as corruption, injustice, and a depiction of the current state of the Philippine government. Other groups of people faced with a similar political scandal may have a different construction of it. As can be seen here, social representations of a political scandal, such as the pork barrel scam, cannot be removed from the social and cultural contexts within which any political scandal occurs. People's norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values, thus, provide a tapestry against which shared knowledge is formed and transformed. Social Representations Theory, as can be discerned, is valuable in investigating locally-embedded phenomena. Utilizing this theory helps a researcher explore group knowledge in specific circumstances and contexts (Howarth et al., 2004).

The study also found that the respondents used images to give form to the phenomenon (i.e., the pork barrel scandal) which they were trying

to understand. For instance, the word, *baboy* (swine) is used to depict or symbolize those whom the respondents perceived as guilty of corruption. Such use of image or symbols to represent a social object and to make the intangible tangible is called objectification. Objectification, according to Wagner and colleagues (1999) “captures the essence of the phenomenon, makes it intelligible for people, and weaves it into the fabric of the group’s common sense” (p. 3).

Capturing the structure of the shared meanings of any social object such as a political scandal helps one see the internal organization of a social representation. This organization is governed by the double system, central system, and peripheral system (Abric, 1996). Awareness of this organization helps in understanding that there are components of a social representation that are stable and rigid, while there are elements that are more flexible because they are more sensitive to the immediate contexts. For instance, years after the pork barrel scam broke out, the fund scandal is still understood as a story of corruption, and Janet Lim-Napoles is still largely associated with it. However, the three legislators (i.e., senators) who were deeply involved in the scam are no longer associated with the scandal. One of them, Ramon Bong Revilla, Jr., even won the senatorial election again in 2019. After the PDAF was declared illegal, there were no longer any protests urging the government for genuine structural change. These examples show that social representations are both rigid and flexible, and consensual yet, at the same time, supportive of the heterogeneity of a group (Abric, 1993).

Political scandal as a construct has almost always been investigated using a post-positivist lens that looked into this social phenomenon in relation to how it impacted the people in society, the politicians themselves, and the political system (e.g., Brenton, 2011, Bhatti, et al., 2013, Long, 2019, Sikorski et al., 2019). This study, however, moves the conversation about political scandal forward by capturing the public’s shared knowledge and emotions that were being formed and transformed through interaction and communication (Moscovici, 1988, Wagner et al., 1995). As such, using a constructivist perspective, one can now go beyond cause-effect relationships of political scandals and take a deeper look at the production of a socially-shared meaning of this social phenomenon.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study show how acts that are interpreted by the citizens as a form of corruption may reduce their belief in the government's capacity to serve them and may lessen their trust in their own leaders (Armah-Attoh et al., 2007). Understanding such acts may also enable people to see that unreliable, corrupt leaders contribute to the suffering of the poor and spoil social services as they siphon off public funds to make more money. Nevertheless, the government is placed in a favorable position as it is seen by Filipinos to be a major player in the scam. This means that the people actually understand that the government has the "power" to do something that is constructive and beneficial, not only things that are devious and destructive. Such power may be used by the government to initiate actions that would address corruption and come up with reforms that would sincerely promote and effect social and structural change.

Social representations can direct ensuing actions and steer discourses about a social object (de Rosa, 2006), thereby creating a space for refabricating meanings, reconstructing reality, and redesigning the process of interaction to pave the way for a veritable social change (Montiel et al., 2013). This space may be utilized by various groups in the Philippine society, particularly by its government, to address political scandals such as the pork barrel scam.

Lastly, the findings also illustrate how social-psychological research studies such as this can help people gain cognizance of how certain groups interpret political scandals affecting society today. In this study, it can be surmised that using the Social Representations Theory as interpretative lens can lead to the construction of group knowledge that is integral and essential to the process of understanding and addressing political scandals or social issues, such as corruption in the country.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I gathered data from the lay people/public and obtained valuable findings. It might be interesting for future studies to look into the actual conversations of the key players of the fund scam. Using these conversations that can be accessed on media can help determine the dynamics of the communication processes of the key players, the way they frame social meanings to reflect

their own construction of reality, and their dominance in the public sphere. This analysis may lead to a greater understanding of the pork barrel issue and may generally provide a clearer direction towards addressing social issues such as corruption or fund scandal. Future studies may also look at the current state of the pork barrel scam in the country, several years after the issue first came out, and see how people's understanding of this issue has evolved across time.

This study focused on a particular scandal that rocked the Philippines, specifically one that revolved around money. Thus future studies may also take a closer look at other forms of political scandals, such as one about power. It would be interesting to see how groups or people implicated in a power scandal position themselves and others, what rights and duties they accord themselves and others, and what is socially accomplished when they position themselves in a particular way. I think that investigating the lived experiences of those who go through the ordeal of being incriminated in a political scandal and the way they make sense of the experience would also be a valuable contribution to political scandal extant literature.

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APPENDIX A

Summary Table

Table 1

Structure of the Representation of the Pork Barrel Scam

	AEO	
	Low Rank < 2	High Rank > 2
High Frequency f > 48.67	corruption (f=249, AEO=1.74) Janet Lim-Napoles (f=45, AEO=1.96)	
Low Frequency f < 48.67	(corrupt) legislators (f=37, AEO=2.14) scandal (f=25, AEO=2.16) injustice (f=25, AEO=2.40) Philippine government (f=17, AEO=2.47) reflection of kind of government in the Philippines (f=16, AEO=2.19) greed, insincerity (f=15, AEO=2.27) causing negative feelings among filipinos (f=9, AEO=2.22)	

APPENDIX B

Sample Words

Table 2

Social Representations of Pork Barrel Scam: Sample Words and Frequencies

Theme	Sample Words	Frequency (f)
Pork Barrel Scam as a Scandal	scandal, controversial issue that involves money of the people, scandal that exposes the dirty politics in the Philippines, big problem of the government	5.71% (25)
Pork Barrel Scam as Corruption	corruption, pagnakaw ng pera na inilaan para sa proyekto, pagnanakaw ng pera ng mga tao, money corrupted by the legislators, ginamit ang perang pinaghirapan ng mga mamamayan upang yumaman ang mga makapangyarihan, The billions gone from the public funds, ghost projects,	56.85% (249)

Pork Barrel Scam as a Reflection of the Kind of Government in the Philippines	our abnormal president blaming Gloria's regime, improper management of Philippine resources, systemic corruption, government incompetence in auditing large funds	3.65% (16)
Pork Barrel Scam as a Mark of Legislators' Greed and Insincerity	self-interest of people in the government, greed of people involved, dishonesty, greediness of those persons seated in power, insincerity of those who are in authority, greed	3.42% (15)
Pork Barrel Scam as Injustice	injustice, eternal suffering of the poor, rich getting richer and poor getting poorer, injustice made by the government officials to the Filipino people	5.71% (25)
Pork Barrel Scam as Arousing Negative Feelings	something that disgusts me, uluglasan, kailinit, displeasing	2.05% (9)
Pork Barrel Scam key Player: Philippine Government	the administration, government, Aquino, President Noynoy Aquino	3.88% (17)
Pork Barrel Scam key Players: (corrupt) Legislators	corrupt officials, senate and congress, senators Bong Revilla, Jinggoy Estrada, Enrile, the Big Three Senators, involved politicians	8.45% (37)
Pork Barrel Scam key Players: Janet Lim-Napoles	Napoles, Janet Napoles, the bogus NGOs and Janet Lim Napoles, The Pork Barrel Queen, the mastermind Napoles	10.27% (45)