Reviewer's report

Title: The social relations of health care and household resource allocation in neoliberal Nicaragua

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Reviewer: Katia Mohindra

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This is a very interesting paper that explores social relations among poor households – between and within households – in the context of health care. This paper argues that as the state social safety net crumbled, the community’s safety net, which is based on reciprocal exchange relationships, also dissipated. Moreover, the inability for individuals to engage in these reciprocal exchange relationships caused social suffering. An ethnographic approach is appropriate for this investigation. This paper will be of interest to BMC International Health and Human Rights. There are, however, a few concerns with the paper.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. While the author makes a compelling case for how the health-poverty nexus can be detrimental to social relations, I am less convinced that the author has demonstrated that these can be attributed to ‘neoliberal structural adjustment policies’ for several reasons:

a) The economic crisis faced by Nicaragua and the SAP(s) that were subsequently imposed are poorly described. While SAPs follow common policy directions of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, there is variation with respect to their content, scope, intensity, and duration, and their effects on the health sector. We have no background understanding of the situation in Nicaragua.

b) It is not clear how the methods used were able to assess changes that have occurred before and after the neoliberal era, the only interview theme that addressed (page 7) changes over time appears to be the last theme, “changes in the availability of economic resources”, but it is not clear what these changes are referring to.

c) The author argues that Nicaragua makes an interesting case since there are three distinct historical periods in which a large segment of the adult population has lived through. Yet the case study that is presented to us focuses on three women aged 38, 22, and 18, which by my calculations would have made them 26, 10, and 8 respectively prior to the beginning of the neoliberal era, making it difficult to see how these women (except Dona Elizabeth) could reflect accurately on the changes that have occurred since neoliberalism. Perhaps interviews with Dona Elizabeth’s parents and in-laws, for example, would have been able to better establish such changes.
d) In the discussion (page 30), the authors refer to the “political violence…dictatorship and war, the prolonged economic crisis” as contributing to frustrations of households, networks, and kin. Why, then, in the rest of the paper, does it appear that the only contributing factor to the dismantling of social relations is related to neoliberal SAPs?

Either the explicit link with neoliberal SAPs needs to be removed from the paper (e.g. page 9 “I explore the contradictory ways that the global political economy has impacted women”) or the case for the link between SAPs and the social relations needs to be clearly made.

2. First sentence of first paragraph of page 4, key points in the literature needs to be presented, what kind of impact (if that is the right word, given the evidence) did SAPs have on health care? A brief summary of the literature needs to be presented before arguing for your own study. I suggest that you include some of the empirical work that has examined SAPs and the health sector in this section.

3. In the methods, a purposive, stratified sample was taken for the 53 households. What was the selection criteria? What was the stratification of households and why this stratification? How many households had several kin ties participating in the study? Were all the households analysed similarly to the case study presented in the paper? Why were these 3 households chosen as the case study?

4. I found the first part of the results section confusing and difficult to follow. The section begins with a definition of neoliberalism and a discussion on SAPs in Nicaragua, which is information that should have come earlier in the paper. There is a very strong statement made that “the impact of these policies…has been dramatic for local systems of reciprocal exchange”. It is not clear what the source of this statement is? Did this come from the study or prior work? There is then a discussion on the reciprocal relationships (does this come for your case study or your larger sample of 53 households?) and a statement that “several study participants recalled mutual assistance among relatives and neighbours as having been stronger during the dictatorship and revolutionary eras”, however, in the case study, only 3 women are discussed who could not have recalled these periods. Who were these participants? There is then a description of health care services with facts, I think, that do not come from this study. For me, the results of this study begin in the middle of page 13.

5. The discussion could be strengthened. For example, the statement made in the conclusion “paradoxically, in the past people were able to help each other more precisely because a stronger safety net existed” is very interesting and it would be helpful to the reader to know how the situation in Nicaragua may compare or contrast to other contexts, where, for example, the social safety net might get stronger in the absence of a strong state sponsored safety net.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Not everyone will be familiar with the linkages between the individual body, the
social body, and the body politic (page 26).

2. Page 5, “60% have access to suboptimal health services, and 40% have no access to health care services at all”. Does this mean no one has access to health care services? What is meant by suboptimal and what is meant by no access (geographical, economic, quality)?

3. Repeating the sentence of , “60% have access to suboptimal health services, and 40% have no access to health care services at all”, in the conclusion does not add anything.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Is there a need to define what a slave is (page 15)? I think this is distracting. This is a strong statement and you might consider picking up on it in the discussion.

2. The paper concludes with a rather vague statement about the need for international agencies to take into account local needs and demands, some more precise policy recommendations for how to address this double decline in safety nets could be very helpful.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.