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THE STEWARDSHIP OF BENEVOLENCE: ITS IMPORTANCE IN ACHIEVING ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC TRUST TOWARDS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Nor Zaini Zainal Abidin^{1*}, Azni Syafena Andin Salamat²

*^{1,2} Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti
Teknologi MARA Kedah, 08400 Merbok, Kedah*

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Corresponding Author:
Nor Zaini Zainal
Abidin@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Local government service delivery is a continued debate even though some of the services, such as solid waste management have been privatized under the assumption that privatization can smoothen the working process efficiently and effectively. Thus, assessment values that guide the public sector in local government service delivery are the primary focus of this paper. Benevolence is one of the valuable principles in administrative accountability. The emphasis on benevolence is highlighted because of the belief that it strengthen public trust toward the government. This paper focuses on the influence of benevolence on public trust in local government service delivery in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Empirical data using questionnaire was tabulated and our analysis using Smart-PLS technique found that there was strong evidence between accountability and benevolence. However, the role of benevolence as a mediator is still open to debate and discussion.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of government service delivery is to ensure that their services are accessible to the public. This needs to be done diligently in order to achieve public satisfaction and government's excellent performance. A democratic government will try to fulfill its promises of reaching the public by providing excellent services but the threats of corruption and lack of accountability have become a dilemma despite having such a good intention (Rana et al., 2019). Citizens have always demanded workable solutions to the ongoing problems of service delivery and the government of the day has also tried to rise to the occasion. The local

government as the service provider is the frontliner who caters to such services. However, the local authorities do not exercise direct accountability to their local communities but instead have to obey the higher governments (Siti Nabihah, 2010). Several efforts have been initiated to increase the accountability of local governments in service delivery. For example, the Star Rating Systems (SRS) was introduced to assess the performance of local government in service delivery (Halimah & Najib, 2009). Two other measures include the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and ISO9000 (Siti Nabihah, 2010; Shardy et al., 2012). Local government must have policies and institutional frameworks that support and sustain the development of local people. These frameworks should be progressive towards realizing and promoting good governance. Furthermore, local governments have faced constraints in giving quality services such as financial management and in countering the excessive burdens and shortages of the required skills. The local government was initially formed to cater to urban matters (Phang, 2008), but its functions have increased following the rise in population due to urbanization and immigration.

2. Problem Statement

One of the most pressing issues involving a prominent role for the local government is in solid waste management. The management of municipal solid waste is the responsibility of the local authorities. The government of Malaysia under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT) facilitates the work of the local authorities by providing financial allotment to purchase appropriate machines, solid waste containers and vehicles. The local authorities in Peninsular Malaysia, for example, have allocated 40 to 50% of manpower to be involved in cleaning, including clearing solid waste (Iwan et al., 2012). Yet, the cleaning and management of municipal solid waste by the local authorities are still insufficient to cater to the increased solid waste production. In the early days, solid waste was disposed of by digging holes near the dwellings, burying the refuse near the dwellings and throwing the waste into the streets or watercourse (UNDP, 2008). However, this process had only managed to contaminate the water channels and caused unpleasant smells. The traditional method had also attracted rodents and jeopardized people's health. Hence, municipal solid waste nowadays is disposed of in landfills through incineration and recycling (Chen, et al., 2021; Fadhlullah et al., 2021). Prior to 1998, solid waste management in Malaysia was managed by the local authorities of each state but the service was later privatized in Peninsular Malaysia due to the problem of massive documentation. The federal government has offered interim contracts to four private companies on the basis of geographical locations. Alam Flora Sdn. Bhd. has been entrusted with solid waste management in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Putrajaya, and Pahang. Environment Idaman has been catering for Kedah and Perlis and SWM Environment Sdn. Bhd. has been handling solid waste for Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan.

The privatization of solid waste management was implemented firstly, to solve problems including the inefficient services of local authorities in solid waste collection and secondly, to ease the financial burden of the local authorities (Teuku Afrizal, 2012). Yet, problems persisted such as the issues reported in Johor whereby the Johor Baharu City Council (MBJB) had received 2,000 to 3,000 complaints from the public concerning solid waste management by private contractors from late 2011 until March 2014 (www.swm-environment.com/swmbulletin/). The Malaysian Congress for Public Workers (CUEPACS) also raised concerns about the privatization of solid waste management by claiming that privatization would cause local authority staff to lose their job or be alienated as public servants, particularly when they were transferred to private companies for overseeing the related solid waste management project, as what had happened in Kedah, Perlis and Selangor. Concomitantly, several local governments also did not fully agree to this privatization step. As such, the Perak Government did not sign the agreement on the takeover of solid waste management (CUEPACS Bantah, 2014). The continuous issue in solid waste management has strongly affected the local authorities. Being infra-sovereign, local

authorities are subject to state government; thus, any decision by the state will make or break the local authorities' success in solid waste management. Therefore, the local authorities' reputation within their local communities will also be affected by the decisions made by the higher government. In other words, to secure public trust and repair the negative image of the local authorities, the government as a policy maker needs to listen to the public outcry and all parties concerned.

This paper aims to investigate the influence of accountability in local government service delivery with the focus on one value that is almost forgotten or rarely discussed which is benevolence. Benevolence can be associated with compassion or altruism. The general definition of benevolence is a selfless or genuine feeling of care and concern for other individuals or the act of philanthropy (Vitz, 2002; Ochs, 2012; Shounjin & Caccamo, 2013). Organizational benevolence means the attention of the employer toward the employees' welfare (Martinez, 2002). The main question which can be asked is whether the act benevolence can be felt in delivering services. By the same token, it also raises the question of whether the influence of accountability through benevolent practices can increase public trust in the government. In this sense, benevolence as an ethical value is seldom investigated in the context of local government service delivery and often it is nonchalantly associated with integrity behaviour (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Rasli et al., 2020).

3. Literature Review

a. Accountability

Accountability is described as a situation by which when it is practiced, it can lead to public trust. Accountability can also be termed as responsibility (Bovens, 2007). Public accountability is the responsibility of public officers on the task or service entrusted for them to be delivered to the public (Bovens, 2005). In this situation, public servants are held accountable or responsible to any decision or action taken in regard to the public interest (Gray & Jenkins, 1993). Accountability of public servants is related to good governance. According to Ahmad et al. (2005), the delivery of public services involves at least two relationships of accountability which are firstly, clients as citizens have to hold policymakers or politicians accountable for allocating resources towards these services, and secondly, policymakers in turn need to hold the service provider accountable for delivering the service. In short, a breakdown in one or both of the links can become a problem and delay in service-delivery outcome.

b. Public Trust

Accordingly, trust is a set of ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalized by members of a community (Fukuyama, 2002). Fukuyama (1999) explained why there has been a broad-based decline in trust both in institutions and in other people. He iterated the reasons as varying from low socioeconomic status, traumatic life events, and religions to aggressive generations.

c. Benevolence

The spirit of benevolence has been practiced by the merchant elite in China since the late 17th century (Shounjin & Caccamo, 2013) where they had established and promoted charitable enterprises in China. Traditional philanthropy has served those who tend to be undervalued whereas modern philanthropy insists upon assigning care and attention with promoting benefits (Ochs, 2012). In this sense, the idea of benevolence inherited from the philanthropy behavior inspire the ethical conduct for benevolent leaders. Thus, benevolent behaviors of the employer involve providing subordinates with care, protection and guidance in both work and non-work domains, which will give the idea to the employees that their employer regards them as a team (Martinez, 2002; Chan et al., 2013).

Benevolence can be classified into three elements which are the emotive element, the performative element and the cognitive element (Livnat, 2004). According to Livnat (2004), "The emotive element of benevolence refers not only to the benevolent person's "feeling" (of care) but also her "willing" (to "do good")" (p. 305). This kind of benevolent feeling impinges on the experience of positive feeling when the object concerned is happy with the care and attention given to him or her and vice versa. However, Livnat (2004) also stressed that mere care and concern also can be considered as the emotive element of benevolence. Likewise, the performative element of benevolence denotes an attempt to relieve others' misery by providing an effort to resolve the object's dilemma. In this sense, as Frankena (1987) mentioned in his account of benevolence:

...doing good consists of benefitting others, preventing evil or harm from coming to them, and removing or remedying it when it does, as well as not inflicting evil or harm on others, not preventing good from coming to them, and not removing it when it does.

(William Frankena in Livnat, 2004, p. 310).

The emotive and performative elements of benevolence must possess cognitive competence when there is an attempt to do good; and to consider it as benevolent, it must also be rational. This comes under the cognitive element of benevolence. By rationality, it implies that the act of benevolence should be understood as to be virtuous where the action taken should be respectful and people look up to that benevolent behavior. The action should be commendable and praiseworthy. This is where the connection begins to appear in linking benevolence with moral worth (Livnat, 2004).

d. Theoretical Foundation

There are several dimensions of benevolence theory that are suitable for discussion. The Efficiency Services Theory opines that the essential function of local government is to provide services and that local government must therefore be judged by the success they achieve in providing services measurable by national standards. Local government is expected to be the most efficient agent for providing services that are essentially local and this implies that local government is indispensable (Makinde et al., 2016). In addition, stewardship theory assumes that public employees are motivated by carrying out meaningful professional tasks that create value for others (Torfing, 2020). Furthermore, stewardship theory is also used to explain "soft" or "relational" relationships that are based on trust and cooperation. This theory seeks how to ensure accountability when a task is delegated from a principal to an executive. Subordinates or executives are assumed to be motivated to act in the best interests of their principals. The steward wants to be a good and loyal steward and will put organizational goals above self-interest (Schillemans & Bjurström, 2020).

On the other hand, Servant Leadership Theory stresses that the most effective leaders are servants of their people (Servant Leadership Theory, 2010). Servant leaders get results for their organizations through whole-hearted attention to their followers and followers' needs. As compared to other leadership theories, Servant Leadership Theory highlights the aspects of collaboration, trust, empathy and ethics. According to this theory, leaders play an important role in managing followers as organizational members. Leaders should act as servants first. In addition, leaders must lead from a desire to serve others and not to focus in attaining more power and managerial authority. The assumption is that if leaders focus on the needs and desires

of followers, practice listening and build consensus, this will directly make the followers respond through increased teamwork, high engagement, favorable behavior and better job performance. Specifically, as servant leaders focus on the growth and development of their followers, followers will feel obliged to reciprocate these positive leader behaviors with positive follower behaviors of their own (Eva et al., 2019).

This theory provides a greater understanding of the roles of top-leader levels in local authorities and their leadership practices. When the leaders are inspiring and emphasize the welfare of followers, then the employees can focus on task and goal achievement. This will give long-term benefits to the public while receiving efficient and quality services from local authorities. Then, the public's confidence and trust towards the government will be highly positive. Clearly, it is the responsibility of the public sector to improve public governance continuously.

4. Methodology

This paper focuses on investigating the service delivery by Malaysian local authorities. Local authorities in the states of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur are chosen as representatives of local governments. Local authorities become the selected domain because of the various services delivered to the public and as a field government, they are the closest to the people. The questionnaires were distributed to five local authorities in Selangor and one local authority in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The employees of these six local authorities form the sampling frame. Although 1300 sets of questionnaires were distributed, we only obtained 46.8% response rate which constituted 608 respondents.

Three hypotheses were developed for this paper which are :

H1 Accountability influences benevolence in local government service delivery

H2 Benevolence influences public trust in local government service delivery

H3 Benevolence mediates the relationship between accountability and public trust in local government service delivery

5. Results and Discussion

a. Findings

The application of Smart-PLS technique was used to analyze the data. Inter-item consistency of our measurement items was measured using Cronbach Alpha. This is an assessment of how well the items are positively correlated to one another. Table 1 checked the reliability of the construct. This study provided alpha values ranging from 0.899 to 0.932. The Harman single-factor test was also conducted to examine the existence of common method variance (Chin, 2010). Common method bias is one of the main issues of measurement error, and it weakens the validity of the conclusion about the measures. Consequently, it leads to a misleading conclusion. By using the Harman single factor test, un-rotated factor analysis showed that it was 43.9% and thus common method variance was not a danger to the study.

Table 1

Internal Consistency Reliability

Item	Loading	CR	Alpha
ACCOUNTABILITY			
AC10	0.749	0.940	0.932
AC11	0.775		
C12	0.731		

AC13	0.692		
AC15	0.718		
AC16	0.734		
AC17	0.736		
AC18	0.729		
AC4	0.731		
AC5	0.736		
AC6	0.745		
AC7	0.663		
AC8	0.737		
AC9	0.695		
PUBLIC TRUST			
PT4	0.806	0.903	0.857
PT6	0.873		
PT7	0.799		
BENEVOLENCE			
B6	0.891	0.937	0.899
B7	0.921		
B8	0.921		

The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). It compares the square root of AVE with the latent variable correlation. The square root of each construct should be higher than any other construct. The result in Table 2 shows that all off-diagonal elements are lower than the square root of AVE.

Table 2
Inter-Correlation Matrix

	ACC	BENV	TRUST
Accountability	0.728		
Benevolence	0.413	0.912	
Trust	0.631	0.363	0.827

The main focus of this paper is to test the hypotheses of direct and indirect relationships between the three constructs (accountability, benevolence and public trust). To study the mediation effect, we used Preacher and Hayes technique to test whether the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable through the mediator is significant or not (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Current views stress that the focus in mediation analysis should be weighed more on assessing the magnitude and significance of indirect effects on accountability, benevolence and public trust. The result for the direct relationship of accountability and public trust shows a positive relationship. However, the tests on the direct relationship between benevolence and trust and the indirect relationship to show benevolence as a mediator were not supported.

Table 3
Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	SE	t-value	Decision
H₁	ACC -> BENV	0.413	0.039	10.654***	Supported
H₂	BENV -> TRUST	0.018	0.022	0.800	Not Supported
H₃	ACC→BENV→TRUST	0.012	0.009	1.226	Not Supported

b. Discussion

Based on the results of H1 (accountability influences benevolence in the provision of local government service), it is justified that accountability is an easily accepted concept and may fit well in any context and situation. This finding was corroborated particularly in the studies by Fard and Rostamy (2007) and Nor Zaini (2018). It proved that accountability is required in any organization. Conversely, Ebrahim (2003) identified that accountability relationships are complicated by the fact that organizations often have to deal with completing accountability demands. Thus, accountability is a relational concept and should be accompanied with ethics to justify its existence.

However, the study found that benevolence is not significant for its influence on public trust and also as a mediator variable. Conversely, the findings by Xie and Peng (2009) and Mesquita (2007) were found to be contradicting our findings, whereby those studies found benevolence to be significant as a mediator. It is interesting to note that benevolence is not considered as an important mediator to public trust, which confirms that the community is not concerned whether the local authority staff genuinely cares for their well-being as long as the services are provided and completed. It also shows that benevolent leaders do not necessarily create the spill effect or transcend the care and concern towards their subordinates. However, the result might be different based on geographical and conditional aspects. In light of the Covid 19 pandemic that has affected us globally, the concern of benevolent leaders has continuously discussed (Nielsen et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Malaysian politics are in turmoil, where power struggles and the grievances of political leaders regarding the credibility of the present government are at the outbreak (Mark et al., 2021). On the other hand, the outraged public over the carelessness and mismanagement of pandemic issues have also become the headlines. It seems that political leaders as well as the government of today are less concerned and belligerent over the pandemic issue and the public welfare during the lockdown phases and economic downturn due to this global pandemic issue. The main question is still whether the results can be changed. The answer is yes. This is because, the situational concern nowadays has witnessed more attention being given to benevolent leaders. The Servant Leadership theory implies that leaders should become a role model in displaying genuine care and concern. Even though most studies do not consider benevolence as an important value to be put at par with other values such as loyalty, honesty, integrity and others (Nor Zaini, 2018), benevolence is still an important tenet in service delivery.

6. Conclusion

The concept of benevolence is seldom accentuated in public service and most of the time the public sector overlooks this matter. The public sector seems to disregard the benevolence aspect of service delivery in order to achieve public trust despite the local authorities having to establish good benevolent practices combined with other ethical aspects. The practices of benevolence provide important messages to the public sector in promoting employees' credibility and showing their concern for public care. This is aligned with the nature of the public sector which highly focuses on providing benefits to the public. The result of this study shows that benevolence is insignificant to public trust and accountability. However, due to the recent circumstances of the global pandemic the results may differ if situations were changed. It is never a doubt to say that benevolence is becoming prominent with the recent findings and further studies need to be done to test the relationships between benevolent public servants in relation to public trust. The public nowadays are more inclined not to trust the

government in power and they insist on excellent services to serve their needs. Efficiency Services theory denotes that the success of the service provider is measured by how far they have succeeded in delivering their services to the public. Thus, local government's achievement in service delivery cannot be measured by how far they will go beyond the prescribed duty to fulfill public needs. On the other hand, Stewardship theory implies that ethical public servants should always be cautious and compassionate in serving their duties. The results from these findings imply that as long as services are delivered successfully, the question of benevolence or compassionate service is not a necessary part of service delivery.

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