

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DURING COVID-19: REFLECTION-BEFORE-ACTION AND METAPHOR-MAKING IN SOCIAL WORK ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Since the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak higher education institutions in most of the world have replaced traditional classes with remote online learning. The sudden shift presents unique challenges for experiential learning in general, and for classes that are centered around in-person human interaction and group dynamics in particular. The current research examines the online shift in a group-work course for BSW students at the Yezreel Valley College in Israel. To respond to the challenges of online experiential learning during the first wave of COVID-19, reflection-before-action and metaphor-making were used as a framework to prepare students. We employed a qualitative case study methodology to explore the experiences and perceptions of students who transitioned to online group facilitation. Drawing on data from a sample of student's reflective texts (N=15), the research questions focused on students' thoughts and feelings regarding online group facilitation during the pandemic; their coping strategies; and the use of reflection-before-action and metaphor-making to mitigate the student's challenge.

The study finding suggest that student's feelings and perceptions were multifaceted. Despite expressions of stress and uncertainty, students also described a sense of anticipation as they acknowledged the unexpected experience as a learning opportunity. Students' strategies for managing the challenge centered around problem-solving that require individual practical planning or asking for support from their fellow group members. Lastly, most students used the framework of reflection-before-action and metaphor-making to construct new meanings for the stressful situation, reframe the challenge and mitigate the difficulties associated with it. We refer to Antonovsky's Salutogenic paradigm to discuss the findings and explore how reflection-before-action and metaphor-making can be used in education to empower students to cope with stressful situations in the future. The educational and institutional implications in the reality of a global pandemic and other social and environmental impending threats are discussed.

Keywords: *experiential learning, social work education, reflection, metaphors, online group intervention*

1. INTRODUCTION

As in many countries around the world, higher education institutions in Israel moved classes online during the COVID-19 outbreak. The shift to online learning posed a unique challenge for classes and workshops that combine theory and practice, since this kind of experiential learning is closely tied to in-person human interaction and group dynamics. This qualitative study is based on the case of an academic course for undergraduate students in the department of social work at the Yezreel Valley College (YVC) in Israel. The course is designed to teach students how to facilitate group interventions, both in theory and practice through a combination of formal learning and experiential components. To respond to the challenges of online experiential learning during the initial stages of COVID-19, reflection-before-action and metaphor-making were used as a framework to prepare students for new challenges.

There is abundant research regarding the use of reflection to guide student education in practice-based learning in many professions (Schön 1991, 1987) as well as a body of research regarding the use of reflection in social work practice (Brookfield, 2009; Spector-Marzel, 2017; Wilson, 2013). However, most of the literature relates to the process of reflection-on-action after completing an activity, reflection-in-action during the activity, or reflection-for-action, which involves analyzing the outcomes of the first two types of reflection and formulating conclusions for future practice. Few studies have

examined the process of reflection-before-action, especially in the context of social work studies. The research about metaphor-making in the context of group intervention and education is not as extensive. nevertheless, there is evidence that point to the effectiveness of metaphors in group settings (Duffy 2005).

The current study explores the experiences and perceptions of students regarding the experiential components of the course, namely group facilitation, and discusses reflection-before-action and metaphor-making as a means for stress mitigations and empowerment. Specifically, we explored: a) students' thoughts and feelings regarding online group facilitation during the pandemic; b) students' coping strategies for dealing with online group facilitation; c) the use of reflection and metaphor to mitigate the challenges of difficult experiences.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The impact of COVID-19 on students in higher education

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 on December 12, 2019, and the World Health Organization's (2020) declaration of a pandemic caused by the coronavirus, the realities of life of millions of people worldwide have changed. Many governments declared a state of emergency and adopted a series of stringent measures to break the contagion chain. People were instructed to physically distance and isolate themselves from others. Neighborhoods, cities, or entire districts were placed under quarantine or lockdown. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Wang et al. (2020) and Cao et al. (2020) found that residents of China experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress at medium to high intensity. In a broad review of recent literature, Brooks et al. (2020) reported widespread negative psychological effects of the lockdowns, some of which evolved into post-traumatic symptoms.

Students in universities and colleges faced distinct challenges due to the COVID-19 outbreak. A comprehensive study of students' perceptions regarding the impacts of the first wave of COVID-19, including data from 62 countries, found that the pandemic severely impacted students in higher education institutions (Aristovnik et al. 2020). Some major changes in most academic institutions around the world and in Israel included the switch to online lectures, the closing of libraries and labs, changed communications with faculty and staff, and new assessment methods. This compelled students to quickly adapt their daily practices regarding academic work and life. These changes also affected students' social life, as many needed to move off-campus and back to their parents' home, and to limit interaction with friends, colleagues, and relatives. Students faced financial repercussions of the lockdown due to job loss, and current as well as future implications for their career. It is important to note that the pandemic has also promoted a few positive changes in student's habits and mindsets such as paying greater attention to personal hygiene, taking care of personal and family health, and taking up physical exercise (Aristovnik et al. 2020).

Israel was one of the first countries to declare a total nationwide lockdown to slow the spread of COVID-19. On March 17, 2020, members of households in Israel were ordered to stay together at home with no time limit and were permitted to go outside for essential activities only (Israel Ministry of Health 2020). A survey conducted by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics at the end of the first lockdown found that about one-fourth of the adult population sustained a decline in psychological wellbeing, about one-third reported increased stress and anxiety, and one-fifth reported loneliness, depression, and tension within family relationships (Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). In an online survey, Israeli students reported that they were concerned about a family member or a friend contracting COVID-19 even more than about being infected themselves. Israeli students were concerned with the worldwide spread of the pandemic, as well as the ambiguous nature of the state of emergency declared by the Israeli government to contain the pandemic and the restrictive measures that followed. The most vulnerable groups were female students, Arab-Palestinian students, and students who were in quarantine due to exposure to the virus at the time of the survey (Schiff et al. 2020).

For social work students, physical distancing measures and other restrictions had a particularly great impact, as they disrupted field placement, which is a fundamental pedagogy in social work. It also

suspended in-person class training, which is the common pedagogy for teaching practice competencies (Kourgiantakis & Lee 2020). In Israel, as in many countries, some practice settings where social work students are trained as part of the regular curriculum were unable to supervise students, had to make extensive changes, or moved to remote learning (Canadian Association for Social Work Education CSWE 2020).

2.2 Teaching group intervention for social work students

Group intervention is one of the main methods in social work practice and an integral element in many therapeutic interventions (Birnbaum & Auerbach 1994). Most of the literature regarding teaching group work and group intervention to social work students underscores the significance of combining class work with experiential learning (Tolman & Molidor 1994). Guided by experiential learning theory, this approach suggests that students who acquire knowledge, skills, and values in the classroom carry this knowledge to their future practice (Kolb 2015). Thus, combining experiential learning with traditional didactic pedagogy improves students' awareness of group processes and dynamics, enabling them to move from understanding the theory to applying it in group settings (Birnbaum 1984; Gitterman 1988; Yalom & Leszcz 2020). Berger (1996) identified four methods of teaching group work: didactic, observation, experiential participation, and experiential group leadership. The factors that help determine what methods should be chosen for teaching group skills include: the phase in which the students are in their professional education, class size, class composition, availability of observable groups, students' learning style, length of the course, the instructors' professional philosophy, and the institutional mission. The department of social work at YVC merges various teaching techniques that incorporate all four of these methods at different stages of the course. Following Knight's (1999) notion of the group as a laboratory, students in this course interchange their roles as group members, group observers, didactic instructors, and group co-facilitators. This allows the group to serve as a laboratory in which different ideas, dynamics, relationships, processes, and group roles can be explored.

One of the most important roles taught and explored in this group setting is that of group facilitator. The facilitator's role involves many responsibilities such as creating basic conditions to ensure a secure base from which the group can develop and attain its goals (Yalom & Leszcz 2020). In order to obtain the capacity to succeed in facilitating a group, students must learn multiple skills that are unique to group work, such as group monitoring, which entails the ability to tune in and observe individual members as well as the collective group. Other core skills include the ability to reflect the mutual aid orientation of group work and involve the facilitator's ability to connect the individual to the group and the group to the individual members by reframing an individual member's comments, behaviors, and experiences in ways that resonate with the rest of the group (Knight, 2014).

During the first wave of COVID-19, both students and instructors were flung into online learning and had to adapt to an unfamiliar pedagogy in the midst of a global pandemic which threatened their own and their relatives' wellbeing. Instructors had to incorporate educational methods that had not previously been used in the course and adapt their existing roles to promote effective student learning.

2.3 The Use of Reflection and Metaphor in Social Work Education

The term 'reflective practice' is used to describe the way in which professionals in various fields work in an intuitive, spontaneous, and appropriate manner to improve results (Ong 2011; Schön 1982). According to Boud (2009), reflective practice is especially suitable for practical professions such as nursing and teaching. Social workers are also considered 'reflective practitioners', in the sense that social workers engage in 'meaning creation' by constructing exemplary themes through their case experiences, rather than applying general principles to individual cases (Schön 1991; Tse Fong Leung 2007). The framework of reflective practice views professionals as artists who acknowledge ambivalence in scientific knowledge (Taylor & White 2001) and adopt a 'knowledge as process' paradigm to inform their practice (Sheppard 1995; Sheppard et al. 2000). Thus, reflective learning, as a process of meaning-making embedded in experience, can be seen as a response to the uncertainty and unpredictability that characterize the environment in which many social workers practice (Tse Fong Leung 2007). Ong (2011) suggested that true education should help students develop inner reflective capabilities, rather than theoretical knowledge. In this educational tradition, the teacher is not merely

the supplier of facts and formal knowledge, but also teaches how to approach the shifting complexities of situations that are new, unknown, or unique.

Schön's model of reflection (1991, 1987) is based on three processes: reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-for-action. The process of reflection-on-action takes place after an activity is finished; reflection-in action occurs during the activity, and reflection-for-action concentrates on analyzing the outcomes of the first two and formulating conclusions for future actions (Schön 1987). Edwards (2017) proposed the use of reflection-before-action to prepare nursing students for challenging situations. Reflection-before-action involves reflection before entering into clinical practice work. In a nursing educational setting reflection-before-action is used to allow for expression of students' emotions with respect to previous experiences before beginning simulation. Alden and Durham (2012) suggested this process is necessary for students to examine previous knowledge and experiences, understand the task at hand, relieve anxieties, and as a means to receive briefing about patients.

The use of reflection-before-action in education that centers on the development of the student as a person, and not merely in his or her professional capacity, requires a deep understanding of the nature of human awareness. Reflection is rooted in beliefs and perceptual frameworks that are mostly out of the realm of awareness (Clark & Peterson 1986). These belief systems inform students' thinking and actions, so it is important that instructors assist students in developing greater awareness of their personal belief systems and their perceptual frameworks that influence their thoughts and actions. In the context of group work, reflection requires students to be aware of the roles they take within the group setting, the roles other group members take, their responses to group dynamics, and the how these roles and responses are based on personal deep-rooted beliefs. One path toward heightening students' awareness of their implicit belief systems involves focusing on the metaphors and images they use to describe the facilitator's role (Marshall 1990).

The cognitive theory of metaphor defines metaphors as mental constructs that link the projection of one schema (the source domain of the metaphor) onto another schema (the target domain of the metaphor). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that the human conceptual system is structured metaphorically and that metaphors are pervasive in human thought processes and language. Therefore, metaphors not only construct the way humans perceive situations, but also influence their actions (Marshall 1990). The analysis of metaphors, can therefore illuminate unconscious elements of human awareness that tend to remain hidden in other forms of discourse (Kupferberg 2016). Gibbs (1994) outlines three main reasons for using a metaphor: to provide a way to express difficult ideas in the simpler language; to provide a compact means of expressing a lot of information in a compressed sentence; and to help capture an experience by providing a lively and detail-rich expression. Metaphorical language is especially suited for stressful experiences in times of crisis as it provides distance, identification, and psychological projection that encourage people to reveal painful emotions. In difficult situations, the use of metaphors may also normalize emotional responses to unexpected situations and provide alternatives to deal with dilemmas and conflicts (Webb 1991).

The literature in the field of group intervention presents diverse uses of metaphors to understand group processes in both practice and education. The use of metaphors in group discourse was found to be effective, since it allows group members to understand and recognize the emotional experiences shared by other group members, without the need to explicitly share their experiences (Duffy 2005).

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of students who transitioned to online group facilitation during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions explored: a) students' thoughts and feelings regarding online group facilitation during the pandemic; b) students' coping strategies for dealing with online group facilitation; c) the use of reflection and metaphor to prepare students when facing a difficult experience.

This qualitative research utilizes case study methodology (Stake 1995; Yin 1993). A case study is an in-depth examination of a situation for which researchers seek to increase their understanding of the

phenomena studied (Johansson 2002). The underlying assumption of this method is that case studies are essential for the development of social sciences (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg 1991; Flyvbjerg 2006). A case study is the main study design used by researchers to study complex phenomena (Richardson, 1993), and is useful for both generating and testing hypotheses (Flyvbjerg 2006). A system of case studies is preferable when investigating contemporary phenomenon in their natural environment and when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not entirely clear (Dayan, 2003). This study design is therefore especially suitable for this research, which was conducted in the context of an ongoing worldwide pandemic.

Reflective methods (Schön 1983) have been applied in the past to help social work students perform and learn during health threats such as a pandemic (Tse Fong Leung et al. 2007). The authors, which were part of the faculty that taught the course in the case under study, designed reflection-before-action assignments to encourage students to connect with past experiences before performing a new task and to deepen their understanding of professional practices (Edwards 2017).

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from YVC's ethics committee. Data were gathered using reflective texts derived from students' assignment. Students were invited to participate in the study after class grades were filed with the registrar so as to avoid coercion. A total of 15 students, which are a sample of 30% of all students that participated in the class, agreed to participate in the study. All study data is anonymized, and participants gave their signed consent to take part in the research. The texts were analyzed using thematic analysis. In coding, we looked for commonalities and divergences, as well as descriptive analyses of the students' experiences. Metaphor analysis was conducted using an interpretive approach whereby each researcher analyzed the data independently before establishing a shared coding scheme (Kupferberg 2014, 2016).

4. FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged from data analysis: moving towards the challenge, managing the challenge, and reframing the challenge.

4.1 Moving towards the challenge

The first theme, moving towards the challenge, relates to students' thoughts and feelings regarding the sudden shift to online learning. Study participants described a general sense of stress and uncertainty. However, for the most part they also recognized the learning opportunity presented by it. In the following example, a student reflected about her feelings regarding the unexpected challenges faced in the virtual environment, as opposed to the task for which she had previously prepared:

I have mixed emotions. On the one hand, for the most part, I am not anxious about speaking to an audience... We did that last year and it was a good experience for me. However, now, this will be totally different, and I am concerned that I might not be able to be on top of it.

This caused physical as well as mental stress, as this participant explained:

My abdomen and chest are contracting, I can't breathe. There are parts of me that have joy, curiosity, and adventure... there are parts of anxiety that overwhelm me, insecurity, and crying, sadness. Why do I need to deal with all that?

Other study participants described challenges, but also identified what they saw as advantages that this challenge could provide. This student identified how learning in a virtual environment could help her deal with her fear of exposure:

I think that the virtual facilitation is unusual. Absolutely no experience in this... could raise new fears. However, I see this as a unique opportunity to experience this. It helps me reduce the fear that my stress and anxiety will be exposed to the group because there is less emphasis on body language in this kind of facilitation, because only the torso is visible.

Study participants explained that their perception of reality was compromised in the move to online learning. Specifically, they referred to what they can or cannot see during online learning, and how this

might change or even distort their perception of what is actually happening. As one study participant said: ‘When you teach through a computer, it’s not like face-to-face. There are things you can’t see, things that can be missed.’ Another study participant described how she doubted her ability to succeed in virtual group facilitation, because of how she might misinterpret reality:

In class, I can see everyone and notice their level of attention, but online it’s very difficult, and it’s impossible to discern whether everyone is really attentive and cooperative. It is not possible to know this through a camera which... does not actually reflect reality. So, I am concerned about my success to facilitate [the group].

The feelings and thoughts students described in reflecting about their situation as they must perform a challenging task during the first wave of the pandemic brought about self-doubt and insecurity. One participant expressed her fear of failing class because of the shift to using computers: ‘I am scared of failing. Not passing the screen test - literally. People are framed in black squares, and the squares are changing, and I can’t follow where everyone is.’ Another participant expressed doubt in her ability to understand the task at hand: ‘Another thing that is hard for me and raises concern is my ability to understand the assignment and the guidelines. I’m afraid I may not understand the assignment correctly and do things wrong.’ An additional cause for insecurity was students’ ability to relate to and engage with their peers, as this student reiterated: ‘I’m not sure I know how you can encourage people to cooperate through screens... I’m not sure to what extent I will be successful in deeply understanding someone’s feelings and maybe also in expressing mine.’

The stress and anxiety created by the need to perform a demanding task in a difficult situation required students to manage the challenge so that they could cope successfully.

4.2 Managing the challenge

The second theme, managing the challenge, pertains to students’ reflection-before-action, which was the task of group facilitation with another student. The study participants described three main coping strategies which they reflected upon in preparation for this task. Although each strategy is distinct, some students’ reflections combine several strategies. The first strategy refers to problem-solving that require practical planning by the participant and use of their individual strengths. This participant reflected upon possible solutions for her hesitations regarding the technology being used:

In order to cope with the task of facilitating and the technological difficulty, I can try to prepare in advance, learn and get to know the Zoom app before facilitating, and even make [Zoom] calls with acquaintances and family members to practice.

Another student reflected on a potential way to overcome the challenge of active participation online: ‘I think it would be best for me and my co-facilitator to invite our group members to participate every time.’

The second strategy students described was relying on support from their peers, either the co-facilitator or other group members. This participant expressed the importance of building a relationship with her co-facilitator to overcome the challenge:

Things that can help me cope with the facilitation task, first and foremost I think a good connection with my co-facilitator. We are not friends, and it can be said that we have not even connected before except for this assignment that we get to do together... I do think that a good connection and mutual understanding could definitely help

Another study participant reflected on the group’s past experiences before the move to online learning, and described the support the group might be able to give her, even if she finds difficulty when performing the task:

We have been acquainted with the group since the beginning of the year, so it’s not a new group and new people. It is likely that this acquaintance will bring cooperation and understanding on the part of the group members, even if my facilitation encounters problems. Thinking about their support and the fact that I will do everything in my power to overcome the technological difficulty helps me approach this in a more relaxed way.

4.3 Reframing the challenge

The third theme, refers to the process through which students gave new meaning to the stressful situation with respect to performing the task. As students reflected on the expected challenge, most went through a process of reframing. This study participant gave new meaning to the shift to virtual learning by viewing it as an exceptional occurrence instead of a threat: 'I think experiencing virtual group facilitation is unconventional...I see it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience.' Another study participant reframed the challenge by giving a more future-oriented meaning to online group facilitation. She described this move as the innovative direction for the future of education:

I find this is a tremendous opportunity here for meaningful learning.... it's the direction towards which the world is advancing. Someone who doesn't know how to be flexible and adapt... could stay behind. So even if I'm not a big tech fan, I embrace this challenge with love and joy.

Metaphor-making was often used when students engaged in reframing the challenge. This participant gave new meaning to her role as a facilitator during the pandemic by using the metaphor of a butterfly, which brought a sense of calmness to the stressful situation:

When I think about a metaphor that will describe me as a facilitator, I imagine a butterfly. For me, that symbolizes calm, space, and color as it flows around, moving here and there, till it finds the flower or leaf that it sits comfortably on while doing its work.

Other study participants used metaphors that reflected their stress, while reframing the situation in ways that emphasized their inner strengths. This participant generated an image of a comforting figure who supports her from within by using the metaphor of an old person:

I see myself as an old figure with gray hair and a beard, many wrinkles adorn his face. His body is sturdy yet fragile, his movements are gentle yet confident, his gaze is piercing. He has lived here for many years, with ancient knowledge of the wisdom of nature, animals, the earth and humans. He knows their language. He encompasses both feminine and masculine elements that are balanced within him... he knows each feeling and has a unique way of seeing people without emotional entanglement... he is self-aware and knows his advantages, powers, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. He is here to guide me. It makes me happy. He is a part of me.

In this metaphor, the development of a comforting and reaffirming inner figure created a new meaning for the experience, reframed the stressful situation, highlighted positive emotions, and gave a sense of empowerment that may support the student when performing the task. Metaphors were also used to illustrate how students wish to perform the task. In the following metaphor a study participant illustrated how she viewed the process of co-facilitating the group: 'I would like me and my co-facilitator to be like a pipe that carries water, so that we can succeed in leading the conversation but also allow group members to lead the discussion.' In the framework of reflection-before-action, this metaphor sheds light on this participant's expectations, and by doing so supports her preparation for the joint task.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of students who transitioned to online group facilitation during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on a case of social work students in Israel, we explore students' reflection-before-action to understand students' thoughts and feelings regarding online group facilitation during the pandemic; their coping strategies for dealing with online group facilitation; and the use of reflection and metaphor to mitigate the challenges of a difficult experience.

The study findings suggest that as students moved towards the unexpected challenge of online group facilitation, they expressed a general sense of stress and uncertainty, which presented itself both physically and emotionally. This finding corresponds with the research regarding emotional stress and wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak (Brooks et al. 2020; Cao et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020) that

points to what Horesh and Brown dub a 'new type of mass trauma' (Horesh & Brown 2020, p 332). Indeed, the findings from the current study indicate that the stress created by the pandemic and the resultant restrictions intensified feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and a sense of compromised perception of reality. To cope with this situation, our findings suggest that students' strategies for managing the challenge centered around problem-solving that require individual practical planning or asking for support from their fellow group members. This corresponds with the literature that suggests that people adopt different coping strategies when dealing with stressful situations. A problem-focused coping style might be adopted when a person believes that stressful conditions can be changed and that he or she has some influence on these conditions. People can also use a support-seeking coping style, that relates to the use of practical, emotional, or informative support. The choice of coping styles is based on one's individual preferences, the level of resources available to him or her, and the individual ability for emotional regulation in the stressful situation (Grotberg, 1995; Lahad & Doron, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Finally, most study participants were able to construct new meanings for the stressful situation, using metaphors to reframe the challenge and mitigate the difficulties associated with it. Marshall (1990) proposed that metaphors can be used with student-teachers as a heuristic device to increase reflection and to encourage reconceptualization of problematic situations. The findings of this study suggest that the use of metaphors could be applied not only to reflect on past problems, but also to reframe future situations that are expected to heighten anxiety and stress. In this sense, the use of metaphors in combination with reflection-before-action may be an effective tool for instructors who wish to empower students to succeed even when they feel overwhelmed.

Antonovsky's Salutogenic paradigm (Antonovsky 1987) for the study of public health offers a theoretical framework that sheds light to the current study findings. Unlike the widespread pathogenic paradigm, which assumes that the normal order of things is healthy homeostasis in which people do not confront physical or mental distress, Salutogenesis is based on a fundamentally different assumption about the world. Salutogenesis posits that the human environment, by its nature, is full of stressors and that mental and physical stress cannot be avoided. This means that the normal state of humans is one of entropy, disorder, and disruption of homeostasis, and that it is continuously attacked by unpreventable disruptions.

Antonovsky later developed the sense of coherence (SOC) construct to conceptualize and operationalize this idea (Antonovsky 1979). SOC reflects the capability to cope with stressful situations. The cognitive aspect of SOC is the comprehensibility component, meaning the extent to which stimuli derived from the internal and external environments are structured, predictable, and explicable. This indicates the extent to which people perceive the world as being ordered and their problems as being clear. The COVID-19 outbreak has made our lives highly unpredictable, and perhaps even more so for some than others. Student may be positioned in a relatively more compromising situation due to multiple stressors, because of their academic and economic status. In their reflections, study participants referred to this unpredictability. However, most could also structure it differently to heighten their SOC. The instrumental aspect of SOC is formulated as manageability, which refers to the extent to which people understand a problem and believe they have the resources needed to cope with it successfully. This may mean that they have control over resources, or that resources controlled by others upon whom they can count are available to them. High manageability means having a sense that by the using one's own resources or with the help of others, one is capable of successfully handling a difficult situation. The current study findings show that reflection-before-action was instrumental in raising students' awareness of their own resources and those of others that may be able to support them. This finding is significant for the understanding of reflection as an educational method. Not only does reflection help develop better professional capabilities (Alden & Durham 2012; Boud 2009) it can also help students develop concrete solutions and the mental capacity to manage problematic situations. The meaningfulness component of SOC refers to the ability to find meaning in everyday events as well as problem situations. A high level of meaningfulness implies that a person feels that life makes sense emotionally, and that at least some of the problems and demands in life are worthy of coping, commitment, and engagement (Sagy, Eriksson, & Braun-Lewensohn 2015). In reflection-before-action, many study participants constructed new meanings for the situation and used metaphors to support coping mechanisms.

The study implications for pedagogy point to the effectiveness of reflection-before-action and metaphor-making as tools for students in practice professions, and specifically for social work students, in order to understand their inner world and to consolidate their professional identity. To understand suffering, pain, and the meaning of life, students need to discover their personal values and belief system. Moreover, from an ethical point of view, familiarity and understanding of their own personal belief systems may help students view their actions more critically, identify situations in which they impose their values on service users, or how shared values can benefit relationship building. The need for self-development increases in the face of rapid changes that make the world seem uncertain, unstable, and complex. For educators and instructors, the use of student's texts vis-à-vis reflection-before-action may support a deep and nuanced understanding of the needs of the students, which is valuable in planning the curriculum.

This study adds to evidence from previous research indicating that the reality of global pandemics, political turmoil, and impending environmental crisis increases the level of uncertainty and stress. This is expected to impact not only traditionally vulnerable populations such as the elderly or poor, but also student populations. It is therefore incumbent upon academic leadership to recognize this threat and to serve as a community base for students. Researchers describe communal resilience as a major factor in dealing with emergencies and national crises in general, and epidemics in particular (Chandra et al. 2011). The development of community resilience is not solely dependent on government and national policy, but rather it is manifested primarily at the community level. Hadar and her colleagues (Hadar et al. 2020) suggested that study programs should incorporate into their curriculum social and emotional competencies that can improve students' sense of wellbeing. If this is not done, they warn, the cycle of stress and lack of coping skills may become long-term problems for students in their professional and personal lives. Tse Fong Leung et al. (2007) studied social work student's reflections in light of the threat of the SARS pandemic in Hong Kong. Specifically with regards to the pedagogy of social work, they proposed that:

...where risks are unpredictable, it is important for a reflective social worker to embrace the inevitable risk, to summon the courage needed to face uncertainty, to reflect on their practice by drawing on experiential knowledge of clients, and to be accountable for their decisions. (p. 397).

To accomplish this, they highlight the importance of academic education and training that develops the student as a person rather than simply focusing on professional skills. As students will have to practice as professionals in a society filled with risks and fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity, this seems crucial (Tse Fong Leung 2007).

This study has a number of limitations. First, COVID-19 constitutes a specific global crisis and may have specific characteristics that cannot be indicative of other kinds of stress among students. Second, this study focuses on students in one college course, and therefore might not be representative of other populations. Third, it is important to note that there were differences among students with respect to family status, religion, culture, age, financial situation, and other aspects of life. The data in this research did not allow for a deep analysis of how these differences with respect to the research questions. Future research should explore these differences using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

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