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DECREASING THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH COMPLETING AN ONLINE MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

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DECREASING THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH COMPLETING AN ONLINE
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Grant A. Horner

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

Research reveals that there are high attrition rates and additional stresses common among online programs. Using the positivist paradigm, this study identified the relationship between stress and certain factors associated with an online Master of Social Work program at a University in Southern California. Four hypotheses were tested to determine if a significant relationship existed between stress levels and the factors of social connection, employment, family status, and year in the program. The study did not find significant relationships between stress levels and the four factors. However, the study revealed relationships exist between social connection and stress levels, employment and stress levels, family status and stress levels, and year in the program and stress levels. The research from this study will help individual online MSW students be aware of a potential cause of stress, enabling them to avoid it proactively or implement relevant coping strategies. This research project will help online MSW programs advertise and educate students about specific factors that may increase stress levels associated with the online program enabling them to reduce stress levels proactively.

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

This chapter identifies the research question and hypotheses that were the foundation for this research study. It provides the research paradigm for the study and the rationale for the research paradigm. Included is a literature review covering the main aspects of the research study, and an explanation of the theoretical orientation for the study. The chapter concludes by explaining the contribution this study will make to the practice of social work.

Research Question

The popularity of online courses has dramatically increased over the last ten years. According to Allen and Seaman (2014), a 16.4% annual increase in students attending online classes took place from 2004 to 2014. Students take classes online because of the convenience, flexibility, and value (Hara and Kling, 2001). Although many conveniences are associated with online learning, several concerns about online programs are being raised.

Two concerns consistently raised in the research are the high attrition rates, above 40%, of online programs, and the additional stresses not experienced by traditional in-class students (Su & Waugh, 2018). Some of the stresses include combining academic rigor with an already busy life of full-time work and/or raising a family. Researchers (Hara & Kling, 2001) further the

discussion by positing that online students experience isolation because of the limited interactions. Isolation increases stress because of the lack of bonding and difficulty building social presence (Kang et al., 2014; Lee, 2014). The stresses connected to online learning are unique, and ways to reduce that stress is important.

The research questions proposed for this study was: How can the stress associated with completing an online MSW program be reduced? This research project aimed to identify the relationship between stress and certain factors associated with online programs. Stress is defined in this study as exterior demands experienced by a person that exceeds the person's ability to adapt (Cohen & Kessler, 1997). The exterior demands are often environmental. Examples of environmental issues include academic rigors, financial difficulties, employment, family demands, and lack of social support. This research study identified common environmental factors experienced by online MSW students and the correlation between those factors and stress levels. The level of stress among online MSW students was assessed by a modified version of the American Sociological Perceived Stress Scale.

This study's four independent variables are social connection, employment, family status, and year in the program. Since online students experience a certain level of isolation (Mogan & Tam, 1999), the impact of isolation on stress levels was addressed. Many students choose online programs because they want to continue with their current employment.

Examining stress levels among students who are employed and completing an online MSW program were examined in this study. Single people, single parents, married or married with children were included in this study to see which of these family statuses impacts MSW online students' stress levels. Lastly, a student's year in school was correlated with increases or decreases in stress levels. The dependent variable for this research project was student stress levels. The American Sociological Perceived Stress Scale was used to determine if students are experiencing average or high stress levels. The survey measured the students' self-report about their current level of stress.

There were four hypotheses tested in this study. The first hypothesis was a negative relationship between social connection and stress exists. The less socially connected (isolated) an online student feels, the higher the stress level. The second hypothesis of this study was that there would be a positive relationship between employment and stress. Students who continue with employment while completing the online MSW program were assumed to have higher levels of stress. The third hypothesis was that students with a partner will have less stress than single students, single parents, or married with kids. The fourth hypothesis of this study was that third-year students would have less stress than first-year students, because as students progressed through the years of the program more connections would be built, which would mitigate isolation resulting in stress reduction.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

The positivist paradigm was used for this study because the research question was correlational. This was considered to be the best way to study this issue because the positivist paradigm assumes an objective reality that can be manipulated and tested (Morris, 2014) and requires that reality is converted into numerical data. The conversion into numerical data allows for correlation tests to validate correlations and significant differences between data.

Four hypotheses were tested to determine the effects of environmental factors on the level of stress experienced by online MSW students. The environmental factors emerged during the literature review. Once the environmental factors were identified, a survey was created to test the correlation between those factors and student stress, which is consistent with positivist research (Morris, 2014).

Literature Review

Students who are attempting to complete an online MSW degree experience heightened levels of stress. Several factors, including isolation, family dynamics, and employment, contribute to increased stress levels. Addressed in this literature review are two types of isolation a student experiences while completing an online MSW degree. Other factors affecting stress levels discussed in this literature review are family dynamics, employment,

and the current year in the graduate program. Finally, a gap in the literature related to MSW online programs is summarized.

Isolation: Lack of social connection and social interaction

As mentioned in this chapter, there are many advantages to online programs; however, many unique factors make online programs difficult. One major downfall of online programs is student isolation (Moore, 2014).

Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) identified the correlation between isolation and increased stress levels. Isolation is now considered as one of the top reasons for attrition (Morgan & Tam, 1999; Duber & Misanchuk, 2001). Isolation is a factor connected to online programs, and it is detrimental because it increases stress levels. Interestingly, the literature identifies two contributing factors that increase isolation among online MSW students.

One contributing factor of isolation in an online MSW program is the lack of connection that naturally occurs in traditional in-class programs. Moore (2014) theorizes that students need to feel a connection to peers, professors, and content. Connection is important because it validates a student's experience (Duber & Misanchuk, 2001). In online programs, the lack of verbal and non-verbal communication between peers and professors removes a form of validation. The lack of communication and validation from professors increases stress among students (Hara & Kling, 2001). Acknowledgment for showing up on time to class and paying attention is removed as validation form in online

programs. Validation in online programs is usually relegated to the evaluation of course work and achieving a certain grade.

A second contributing factor that increases isolation in an online MSW program is the lack of social interaction. As previously mentioned, social connection is associated with validation; however, social interaction is associated with a sense of belonging and community (Duber & Misanchuk, 2001). According to Sun et al. (2019), online students need a community that enables them to feel heard, provides collaboration and social support, and sympathetic responses from peers. The goal is to achieve a sense of belonging in which students can collaborate and interact with other students personally and not just a purely academic level.

Duber and Misanchuk (2001) report the four elements of McMillian and Chavis' Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) model that produce a sense of community. *Membership* is the first element. Membership is connected to the idea or feeling of belonging. Online students must sense that they are part of the community. *Influence* is the second element. A student feels they have influence when they can help shape others in a way that makes a difference. *Needs* are the third element. Each online student has specific needs that surface throughout a semester. How well those needs are being expressed and met determines if a student feels connected or isolated. Finally, the fourth element is an *emotional connection*. According to Duber and Misanchuk (2001), an emotional connection occurs when students share similar experiences. The lack

of all four elements results in a reduced sense of social interaction, which increases the feeling of isolation. According to a study completed by Barreira, et al. (2018), students who lack close friendships and friendships that enable them to disclose personal feelings and struggles have increased feelings of isolation and worse mental health.

Family Dynamics

Another factor affecting online MSW students are family dynamics. Family dynamics can be comprised of a spouse, a significant partner, and/or children. Family dynamics can be in the form of married with no kids, married with kids, or single parent. Interestingly, there is contrasting research about the impact family dynamics have on stress levels for online students. According to Crockett et al. (2007), a supportive family can reduce the amount of stress experienced by online students. Families act as a buffer to stress by providing support, encouragement, and comfort.

In contrast, Lawson and Fuehrer (2001) postulate that family dynamics contribute to increased stress among online students. The academic demands of graduate school reduce the amount of time students can spend with family members. The result is family members can feel neglected (Lawson & Fuehrer, 2011), which results in conflict and increased levels of stress.

Employment

Financial difficulties increase the stress experienced by graduate students (Grant, 2002). The financial difficulties are connected to the substantial loans

and debt associated with obtaining the degree. Financial hardships are one of the main reasons graduate students seek counseling (Furr et al., 2001). An attractive component of online programs is the belief that students can maintain employment; therefore, minimizing loan debt. When employment is added to academic requirements and field placement internships, the stress level increases (Addonizio, 2012).

Year in Program

A recent study (Barreira et al., 2018) on the prevalence of mental health issues among graduate students revealed stress levels differed between different years in the program. According to the study, the longer a student is in a graduate program, the higher the stress level. The study states, “14.5% of the first-year students are experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety, compared to 25% of those who are in years 5+ in the program” (Barreira et al., 2018, pp.4-5).

Stress for first-year students is often connected to transitions associated with graduate school. First-year graduate students feel the lack of support from social and campus activities increases stress (Nelson et al. 2001). The increase in academic demands connected to graduate studies also takes a time adjustment and increases anxiety level.

As students progress through a graduate program, balancing personal life with academic demands becomes more difficult. The increase in academic rigors and responsibilities during the advanced years cause students to minimize

self-care. Feldman et al. (2004) identified that academic responsibilities and an internship results in many graduate students no longer prioritize personal interests and social support. The lack of social support creates a sense of isolation, which increases stress and anxiety (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000).

Gap in Literature

The majority of research regarding stress and students has been conducted at the undergraduate level (Addonizio, 2012). There is a limited amount of research to identify the causes of stress among graduate students. The research conducted at the graduate level primarily focuses on medical, nursing or psychology students (Givens & Tjia, 2002). The research of MSW students is more limited than other graduate programs, and the research on online MSW students is extremely limited.

This research project increases knowledge about the unique stress experienced by online MSW students. It provides insights on ways to reduce the stress associated with completing an online MSW program, and it helps universities better prepare online students to complete a MSW degree.

Theory Guiding Conceptualization

This research project's theoretical orientation is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which was developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The theory was developed to understand better the cognitive process that occurs during a transaction between an individual and an environmental stimulus and

the impact on stress levels. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress is not purely based on an external stimulus, nor is it purely based on an individual's response to a stressor. Stress manifests during a transactional cycle that includes appraisal and coping (Biggs et al., 2017).

The transactional model of stress and coping proposes that a cycle of appraising environmental stimuli is followed by determining coping strategies to manage the reaction to that environmental stimulus. As coping strategies are engaged, a reappraisal begins to determine if the coping strategy sufficiently managed emotions or the stressor. According to Biggs et al. (2017), outcomes are considered favorable, unfavorable, or unresolved. If it is determined that harm, threat or challenge continues to be beyond an individual's ability to cope and negative emotions persist, the effort was unfavorable or unresolved, and the cycle begins again. Coping strategies are reengaged, followed by another reappraisal.

A valuable insight gained from the transactional model of stress and coping reveals why the same event can be stressful for one person and not another person. During the appraisal period, a situation is evaluated based on an individual's values, goals, beliefs, and resources. Not everyone shares the same values, goals, beliefs, and resources; therefore, the perception of the event determines if a person deems a situation to be stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The second valuable insight gained from the transactional model of stress and coping relates to coping strategies. Promoting specific coping skills or determining if coping skills are being effectively engaged are not the theory's goals. The goal is to deploy coping skills that result in "...managing external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). It does not matter which coping strategies a person engages. The theory focuses on coping skills that result in eliciting positive emotions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

This research project is about determining ways to reduce stress; therefore, determining individual students' stress level is necessary. The transactional model of stress and coping is an effective way to determine stress levels because it allows students to determine their stress level based on their appraisal of a situation and their coping. Once the stress levels of students are determined, the researcher was able to deduce commonalities that may contribute to lower levels of stress

Contribution of the Study to Micro and/or Macro Social Work Practice

This research helps individual online MSW students be aware of a potential cause of stress at the micro-level, enabling them to avoid it proactively. Through this research, students experiencing high levels of stress gain specific insights through this research about ways to reduce stress. This research helps online MSW programs advertise and educate students about specific factors that

may increase stress levels associated with the online program at the macro level. The research also helps MSW online programs assist students in proactively reducing stress levels.

Summary

This chapter introduced this research study's topic as the correlation between isolation and stress experienced by online MSW students and how levels of isolation and stress change for students throughout the three-year program. The research question was identified, and four hypotheses connected to the research question were presented. A positivist paradigm was used to conduct the research, and the rationale for the research paradigm was given. A literature review provided further understanding of the topic and insights from other research studies. The theoretical orientation of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was explained. The chapter concluded with an explanation of the contribution this study can have on social work practice.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

This chapter provides insights about the study site and how access was gained through a gatekeeper. It addresses critical issues regarding the researcher's self-preparation before conducting research and the potential issues related to diversity, ethics, and politics. Lastly, the chapter addresses the use of technology in this research study.

Research Site

The research study was conducted at a University in Southern California that offers an online Master of Social Work program. The University opened in 1965, offers more than 70 degrees between the baccalaureate and master's programs, and serves more than 20,000 students each year. The University is the most diverse university in the region reflecting the diversity of the region. The program is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and it is a three-year program that is entirely online (School of Social, n.d.). The Master's of Social Work program is cohort-based; students complete each year of the three-year program with the same cohort of students. In addition to the online classes, students must complete a field practicum consisting of 480 hours during the second academic year and 600 hours during the third academic year.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeeper at Research Site

The gatekeeper for the online MSW program was the Director of the School of Social Work. In order to conduct this research project, permission from the Director of the School of Social Work was required. The researcher sent the Director an email requesting to research of the online MSW program. A question about anonymity and confidentiality was raised, and the researcher of this project submitted the information being requested. The gatekeeper granted permission for the study to be conducted (Appendix A).

Once the School of Social Work Director granted permission, an additional email was sent to the gatekeeper proposing that an email containing a Qualtrics survey link be sent to all online MSW students through the MSW administrative office. The Director agreed to use the MSW administrative office to send the link. The Qualtrics software was purchased. The researcher conducted research to determine which tools would be used to measure stress among students. Two tools were chosen for this research project: Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, 2016). The data from the two tools were used to create the survey, and the link was created for students to access the survey. An email explaining the survey and the link was sent to the School of Social Work Director. The Director drafted a brief email to encourage participation, attached the link, and sent the survey to all 77 online MSW students.

A total of 25 students completed the survey from the initial email. Hoping to increase the number of participants, the researcher contacted the researcher advisor about sending out a second email requesting participation. A discussion about reducing the potential of a student retaking the survey and invalidating the result occurred and it was determined this would be unlikely. It was agreed the email must clearly state that the survey was being sent again to encourage participation and to thank those who already participated. The email was drafted, sent to the Director of Social Work, and it was sent with the Qualtrics survey to the distribution list a second time. An additional twenty students responded for a total of 45 completed surveys.

At the conclusion of this research project, the Director received an email offering a debriefing of the research results. This research study provides statistical information and analysis connected explicitly to the University's MSW program. The insights gained from this research project could potentially enhance the academic experience for future online MSW students.

Self-Preparation

Two technological issues of preparation occurred before data was gathered. The first technological issue was choosing Qualtrics software and inputting the survey data into the software. Research on survey software was conducted, and Qualtrics software was chosen. The second technological issue was downloading the SPSS software that was used to conduct correlation tests.

The researcher prepared for when data was submitted. An external hard drive with password-protection was purchased. All data was stored on the password protected hard drive to maintain confidentiality.

Lastly, the researcher tested the survey tool among a small sample of people, including the research advisor, to determine if the directions were clear and the tools were collecting the needed information. The sample test passed the requirements, and no further changes were made to the survey.

Diversity Issues

Understanding how each race and culture define community is one diversity issue that needs to be addressed. Research reveals that limited studies have been conducted about online programs and diversity. For example, research (Hara & Kling, 2001; and Sun et al., 2019) acknowledge the importance of online communities and the feeling of isolation among online students; however, neither address how diverse groups define community or isolation nor do they address which cultures are most affected by online communities or feelings of isolation.

Online programs are more attractive and feasible for specific demographic populations with access to the internet, trust in technology, and technological proficiency. Certain ages and cultures might be at an academic disadvantage because of limited technological resources, which are required to complete an online program.

Ethical Issues

A research study of MSW students raises certain ethical questions. The ethical issues are connected to power and protection. Once the issues of power and protection are revealed and understood, they must be addressed.

Power Issues

The researcher asked the Director of the School of Social work to distribute the survey through email. Since that individual represent the University, the ethical issues of the abuse of power must be considered. In the informed consent, the researcher diligently ensured that students do not perceive their grade or standing at the University is dependent upon participating in the research study. The researcher clearly explained that a student's participation in the research study is entirely voluntary, and no punitive actions will occur for students who chose not to participate.

Protection Issues

A second ethical issue revolved around protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality and protecting participants from harm. Anonymity and confidentiality refer to protecting a person's identifying information (Morris, 2014). Before conducting research, participants must trust that the researcher will not allow their identities to become known nor allow the information they provide to be connected to them. The issue of anonymity and confidentiality were covered in the informed consent (Appendix B).

Participants must be protected from experiencing harm. Regarding this research study, it was essential to protect participants who have been traumatized from being retraumatized. An aspect of this research study evaluated a participant's isolation associated with an online program. Some participants may have experienced negative forms of isolation in the past; therefore, the researcher formulated questions that reduced the possibility of retraumatizing participants.

Addressing Ethical Issues

When addressing ethical issues, it is important to focus on respect to person, beneficence, and justice. Respect to person is about upholding the *requirement to acknowledge the autonomy and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy* (The National Commission 1979). Respect to person is addressed through informed consent (Appendix B). According to Morris (2014), "informed consent will describe the study, how it will be carried out, any potential risks, any guarantees, who the researcher is, and the auspices of the project" (p. 76). Informed consent clarified essential aspects of the research study empowering participants to decide about their involvement. Informed consent also addressed the issue of autonomy. Through informed consent, research participants are given the information they need to decide to participate voluntarily.

Beneficence refers to protecting participants from harm and securing participants' well-being. The potential harm related to this research project was

minimal and only had the potential of slightly increasing stress as participants answer questions about stress. Securing participants' well-being occurred by not collecting any personally identifiable information during the data collection.

Justice requires the selection of research subjects to be equitable (Bailey, 2018). This research project upholds justice because all students enrolled in the online MSW program were asked to participate in the research project.

Political Issues

The political issues for this research study were connected to the survey site. Conducting research at a university requires the research to uphold the standard of quality established by the university. The University reviewed a research proposal for this research study to determine if it met the University's standard of quality. Working with the gatekeeper to determine the University's standard of quality for research helped the researcher of this study develop a proposal that was accepted.

Another political issue revolved around the ways this study benefits the University. This study's underlying goal was to enhance the online MSW program by providing to the University potential solutions to issues that were uncovered. Those solutions and ideas were given to the University, and a follow-up meeting with the Director of the School of Social Work to go over those ideas was recommended.

Another possible political issue that could have occurred was disagreement among administration and professors within the MSW program about the research study's focus. It is possible that some of the administration would want certain aspects of the online MSW program researched, while others would disagree and desired different aspects to be researched. The researcher of this study worked exclusively with the gatekeeper to reduce the possibility of political disagreements.

The Role of Technology

Several types of technology were used in this research study. Communication with the gatekeeper was primarily conducted through email. Email was the preferred method for communication because of the distance between the University and the researcher. Email was used to coordinate with the gatekeeper details about distributing the survey to the MSW students. Once the survey was completed, approved by the gatekeeper, and the details were finalized regarding when the email would be distributed, the gatekeeper distributed the survey to each student through email.

Online Qualtrics survey software was used to format the survey, which allowed students to complete the survey online and submit the results. Students received a link to the survey, completed the survey, and returned it to the researcher. Qualtrics software allowed for informed consent to occur before taking the survey.

SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The researcher collected all data, entered the data into the software, and the SPSS software analyzed it and gave results. Those results were reported by the researcher and analyzed for further insights.

Summary

This chapter introduced the study site as a University in Southern California that offers a Master of Social work degree. Access to the study site was gained through a gatekeeper, and this chapter explained the strategies used to engage the gatekeeper. Several critical issues were also addressed in this chapter. The researcher's self-preparation in the area of topic research, site research and tool preparation were expounded. The critical issues of diversity, ethics, and politics were addressed. Finally, an unfolding of specific use of technology that was used for this research study was given.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

This chapter describes the study participants and how they were selected for this study. The chapter then discusses how data was gathered, the different data collection phases, data recording, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a plan for termination and address follow-up with participants.

Study Participants

The population of interest for this study was limited to students who were enrolled in a fully online MSW degree program at a University in Southern California. As mentioned in Chapter One, the student population in 2020 was comprised of approximately 77 students. The online student population is 88% female, 12% male, 47% Hispanic, 32% white, 10% African American, 3% Asian, and 5% two or more races.

This was a three-year program. Students in the second year of the program completed at least 16 hours a week at a social work internship, and students in the third year were completing 20 hours a week at a social work internship. The demographic information for the study sample is displayed in Table 1. The study's largest ethnic group was Latino (41%), followed by White (27%). The remainder of the ethnic groups were African American (14%), multiple ethnicities (14%), Asian (2%), and other (2%). Females comprised 87%

of those completing the survey, and males were 9%. The relationship status consisted of 36% single and 61% partnered. Participant's family status included 57% with children under eighteen years old and 43% without children. Three categories of employment were identified, which included 71% full-time employed, 18% part-time employed, and 11% unemployed. Students were asked what year in the MSW program they were completing the results were first-year (23%), second-year (45%), and third-year (32%).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	%	Variable	%
Ethnicity	100	Relationship Status	100
African American	14	Single	36
White	27	Partnered	61
Latino	41	Other	2
Asian	2	Children	100
Multiple	14	Yes	57
Other	2	No	43
Age	100	Employment	100
21-29	34	Part-time	18
30-39	39	Full-time	71
40-49	20	NA	11
50-59	5		
Sex	100	Year in Program	100
Male	9	1 st year	23
Female	87	2 nd year	45
NA	2	3 rd year	32

Selection of Participants

The total population of interest was sampled for this study. This research project used convenience sampling. All students in the online program had an equal opportunity to participate; they either chose to participate or not participate in the study. A total of 44 participated in this study, which was a 57% response rate.

The participants selection began when the researcher contacted the Director of the School of Social Work, who has access to all the email addresses of students in the MSW online program. The University policy is email lists are not distributed to individual students, which resulted in the researcher and Director coordinating to distribute an email. An email was created that contained information about the study, the informed consent, and a Qualtrics survey link. The email was sent out to all students currently enrolled in the MSW online program by the Director of the School of Social Work. The response was low from the first email, and so a second email was sent, which resulted in an additional 20 students completing the survey.

Data Gathering

The data for this study was gathered quantitatively through the distribution of an online survey sent to all students in the MSW online program at a University in Southern California. The first part of the survey collected demographic information (Appendix C), and the second part of the survey

contained a Likert scale that included two assessments, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Appendix C). Both the Perceived Stress Scale and the Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support are public domain. The data collection was converted into numerical values, which allows for objective measurement (Morris, 2014).

There were efforts to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity of students occurred by not collecting any personally identifiable information. Students were contacted through an email distributed by the Director of the School of Social Work; therefore, the researcher did not have access to names or emails. The consent form was signed with an “X,” acknowledging the student agreed to the informed consent information. There was no identifiable information on the survey, such as names or birthdates. The results were sent directly to the researcher, and only the researcher had access to the results. Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained by saving all results to a password-protected external hard drive.

Phases of Data Collection

The first phase of the data collection began when the survey was emailed to students during the 3rd quarter of the 2019/2020 school year. The data was collected at the beginning of May 2020, during the time students were concluding the quarter and preparing for finals. Since this study was about reducing stress

associated with completing an online MSW students, it was important to survey students during a time in which stress was potentially high. The end of the quarter was a stress rich environment, and students that reported low stress levels could be examined to determine if the factors tested in this study were present.

The second phase of data collection occurred after the students completed the survey and submitted the results. Students were initially given two weeks to participate in the survey and submit their results. Since only 25 completed surveys, another email was sent reminding students to participate. The second email was sent approximately two weeks after the first survey, and an additional 20 participants completed the survey. In order to avoid students filling out the survey twice, the instructions contained in the second email specifically stated that the email was a reminder to participate in the survey for those who did not participate and thanked the students who already participated.

The third phase of data collection occurred when the researcher received results from participants. Once the results were received, the researcher saved them to a password-protected external hard drive to maintain confidentiality. Each survey did not contain personally identifiable information to maintain participant anonymity.

Data Recording

Date recording occurred after all surveys were received. Once all surveys were received, the data analyzed. The demographic data of those who participated in the study was determined. The researcher analyzed the stress levels among students and determine which students fit into an average stress category and which students fit into a high- stress category. Following the data recording of stress levels, the researcher analyzed the social support data to determine perceived social support. Once the data was recorded for demographics, stress levels, and social support, the researcher conducted SPSS independent t-tests to determine correlations between stress and other independent variables.

Data Analysis

This research project is a descriptive study in which the correlational between the dependent variable of stress and several independent variables was analyzed. Once the data was collected through the online survey and recorded, dependent and independent variables were analyzed to determine correlations and statistical differences.

The dependent variable for this study was student stress. Based on the Perceived Stress Scale data, scores were correlated to determine stress levels among students. According to Cohen et al. (1983), the average stress level is 15 points or lower, and high-stress levels are 16 plus points. Data from the

Perceived Stress Scale was analyzed to determine which students have average stress (a score of 15 or less) and which students have high stress (A score of 16 or higher).

Four independent variables were examined in this study. The independent variables are social connection, employment, family status, and year in the program. Levels of social connection were determined by using the data analysis formula from the Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support. According to Zimet et al. (1988), those who score between 1 to 2.9 have low support, those who score between 3 to 5 have moderate support, and those who score between 5.1 to 7 have high support. Employment, family status, and year in the program were gathered from the demographic information.

After dependent and independent data were calculated, SPSS independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine relationships and statistical differences between the dependent and independent variables. An independent sample t-test, using SPSS software, was conducted to determine if there is a relationship between stress levels and social support. Another independent sample t test to determine a relationship between stress levels and employment was conducted. Additional independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine the relationships and statistical differences between stress levels, family status, and year in school.

Summary

This chapter described the engagement process for this research project. The chapter began by describing the study participants for this research project were currently enrolled students in a fully online MSW program at a University in Southern California. Those students were selected by sending out an email to all online MSW students to participate in the research project. This chapter then explained that the specific data would be gathered using a Likert survey and demographic survey, and examples of both surveys were provided. How the data was collected and recorded was summarized. The chapter concluded by explaining the process of data analysis and the use of SPSS software.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the data analysis for the research project and provides data interpretations. The data analysis contains demographic information, frequency distributions, and test results. The data interpretation reviews the hypotheses and draws a conclusion for each hypothesis based on the data. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the impact of the data analysis on micro and macro practice.

Data Analysis

A total of 45 students signed the informed consent, and 44 students completed the survey (N=44). One student completed the demographic information but did not complete the remainder of the survey; therefore, that data was removed from the study results. Each student completed a Perceived Stress Scale survey. Table 2 contains the perceived stress data. The stress scale was broken into two categories based on the research of Cohen et al. (1983). The two categories are average stress (results between 0-15) and high stress (results of 16+). A total of 8 students (18%) had *average stress* and a total of 36 students (82%) had *high stress*.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Perceived Stress

Variable	N (%)
Average Stress (0 -15)	8 (18%)
High Stress (16+)	36 (82%)

Students also completed the Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support, and the results are contained in Table 3. The scale was used to measure the amount of perceived support a student experienced from a significant other, family, and friends. The scale was broken into the categories of low support, moderate support, and high support. The noteworthy data includes students (N=35) who reported high support from a significant other (80%). Students (N=26) reported high family support (59%). Students (N=29) reported high friend support (66%).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Participant's Perceived Social Support

Variable	N (%)
Significant other Support	
Low Support (1 – 2.9)	4 (9%)
Moderate Support (3 – 5)	5 (11%)
High Support (5.1 – 7)	35 (80%)
Family Support	
Low Support (1 – 2.9)	5 (11%)
Moderate Support (3 – 5)	13 (30%)
High Support (5.1 – 7)	26 (59%)
Friend Support	
Low Support (1 – 2.9)	5 (11%)
Moderate Support (3 – 5)	10 (23%)

High Support (5.1 – 7)	29 (66%)
Overall Perceived Support	
Low Support (1 – 2.9)	4 (9%)
Moderate Support (3 – 5)	9 (20%)
High Support (5.1 – 7)	31 (70%)

The mean of variables was compared to determine which variables had the highest stress levels. Table 4 reports for each variable the mean for stress. Comparing the means for different employment statuses revealed that part-time employed students experienced the highest level of stress (mean = 22.1250), followed by full-time employed students (mean = 21.8065). Unemployed students experienced the lowest level of stress (mean = 20.4000). The data revealed that single students experienced higher stress levels (mean = 23.3750) than partnered students (mean = 20.5185). Students with children reported higher stress levels (mean = 22.0400) than students without children (mean = 21.2632). Students in the first year of the MSW program reported the highest stress levels (mean = 22.0000), followed by third-year students (21.6429). Second-year MSW students had the lowest stress level (mean = 21.6000).

Table 4 Stress: Mean Statistics of Stress Level Based on Specific Variable

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Employment			
Part-time	8	22.1250	7.21976
Full-time	31	21.8065	6.72022

Employed	39	21.8718	6.72849
Unemployed	5	20.4000	4.61519
Relationship Status			
Single	16	23.3750	7.25603
Partnered	27	20.5185	5.93147
Children Status			
Children	25	22.0400	5.76975
No Children	19	21.2632	7.48956
Year in Program			
1 st year	10	22.0000	7.97217
2 nd year	20	21.6000	5.80744
3 rd year	14	21.6429	6.80053

Several independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in stress levels between variables. There was no significant difference between stress levels when comparing employment status, relationship status, children status, or year in the program.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine if perceived social connections significantly impacted different independent variables. According to the data, employment, children, significant others, family, and friend support revealed no significant differences. However, there was a significant difference between singles and partnered students and their perceived social support. Table 5 reports the results of the independent samples t-test comparing social support between partnered and single students. Partnered students reported significantly more social support from a significant other ($t = 2.363$) and family ($t = 2.688$) than single students.

Table 5 Independent Sample T-test of Social Support and Stress Levels

	Partnered		Single		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Significant Other Support	6.03	1.56	4.84	1.66	2.363*
Family Support	5.53	1.71	4.15	1.45	2.688*

* p < .05

An independent Sample T-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between social support and a student's year in the program. Table 6 reports the results of the independent samples t-test results comparing significant other support and year in the MSW program. There was no significant difference between first-year and second year in the program. There was no significant difference between second-year and third year in the program. However, there was a significant difference between first and third-year students and the support of a significant other. Third-year students experienced significantly more support from a significant other ($t = 2.305$) than first-year students.

Table 6 Independent Sample T-test of Significant Other Support and Year in School

	1 st year	2 nd year	
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	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Significant Other Support	4.73	2.05	5.60	1.75	1.208
	2nd year		3rd year		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Significant Other Support	5.60	1.75	6.16	.93	1.097
	1st year		3rd year		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Significant Other Support	4.73	2.05	5.60	1.75	2.305*

* p < .05

Data Interpretation

The research question for proposed for this study was How can the stress associated with completing an online MSW program be reduced? Four hypotheses were tested in this project. The first hypothesis was that a negative relationship between social connection and stress exists. The hypothesis that there was a significant relationship between social relationship and stress was rejected. Although the hypothesis was not proved, the data does reveal insights about social connection and stress levels. According to the data, third-year students had the second-highest stress level (Table 4), but they had the highest perceived social connections (Table 3). First-year students had the highest stress levels (Table 4) and the lowest perceived social connections (Tables 3). The data collected in this study about social isolation and elevated stress is

consistent with the research by Morgan and Tam (1999) and Haythornthwaite et al. (2000).

The second hypothesis was a positive relationship between employment and stress exists. The second null hypothesis was not rejected. The data (Tables 5, 6) did not confirm a significant difference in stress between employed and unemployed graduate students, which failed to confirm a positive relationship between employment and stress. The data did reveal that a relationship does exist between stress and employment status. The mean stress level of an unemployed student was 20.4000, and the mean stress level of an employed student stress was 21.8718. The data findings in this study that demonstrated a relationship between employment and stress levels are consistent with the research by Addonizio (2012) presented in chapter one.

The third hypothesis was that students with partners will have less stress than single students, single parents, or married with kids. The third null hypothesis was rejected. Although the data supports students with partners have less stress than single students (Table 4), there was no significant difference in stress levels between single and partnered students.

The fourth hypothesis was third-year students would have less stress than first-year students. The fourth null hypothesis was not rejected. The data reveals there was no significant difference in stress levels between the two groups. When comparing the stress level mean for each group, the data reveals that third-year students have less stress (mean = 21.6429) than first-year

students (mean = 22.000), but not significantly less stress. Research from Barreira et al. (2018), presented in chapter one, revealed that the longer a student is in a graduate program, the higher the stress. This study did not confirm the results from the research conducted by Barreira et al. (2018).

This study revealed that most of the MSW students had high levels of stress (82%). The goal of this study was to determine specific factors that contributed to the high levels of stress. Although the study provided some data that confirmed elevated stress levels, it did not clearly reveal which factors increased stress levels.

One factor not considered in this study that may have elevated stress levels and skewed the data results was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the United States completely shut down, and a stay-at-home order was in effect for most of the country. The survey for this study was distributed less than two months after the pandemic was declared. The national pandemic undoubtedly elevated the stress level of most of the MSW students surveyed.

Implications of Findings for Micro and/or Macro Practice

Although all four null hypotheses for this study were rejected, the study did reveal that most Master of Social Work students have high levels of stress. This study attempted to determine factors that elevated stress levels. The study

revealed no singular cause of stress but a combination of variables that elevate stress.

At the micro-level, this study can help Master of Social Work students understand the importance of self-awareness in monitoring stress levels and identifying the causes of personal stress. This study reinforces the importance of understanding that variables like employment, lack of social connections, and program year may elevate stress levels. Students should develop coping skills specifically targeting those areas and be aware that other variables may increase stress levels.

At the macro level, this study confirms that MSW students have high levels of stress. Research has been conducted on graduate students, but this study specifically targeted MSW students. This study provides universities with insights into specific variables that increase stress levels for MSW students. Universities can use the knowledge to emphasize the need for MSW students to monitoring stress levels and determining what is causing the stress. Universities can use this data to provide examples of factors that may increase student stress levels. Universities can make available support groups that specifically talk about variables that increase stress among MSW students and ways to manage those variables.

Summary

This chapter presented the data analysis for this study, which included frequency distributions and test results. This chapter also presented data interpretation and revealed that all four null hypotheses were rejected. The chapter concluded with micro and macro practice suggestions to help students and universities reduce MSW students' stress levels.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Introduction

This chapter explains the process for the termination of the project and the termination with the participants. It provides information about how the findings will be communicated, an evaluation of how this project impacted the study participants, and suggestions for further study. Lastly, this chapter explains the dissemination plan for the project's findings.

Termination and Follow-Up

Termination of this research project began after the survey was completed. Maintaining confidentiality required the author of this study to assign a number to each participant, and no identifiable information was collected from the participants. No additional communication has occurred with the students who participate in the research project. Students who chose to participate in the study were given instructions at the beginning of the survey to obtain a copy of the results at the University's library.

Communication of Findings and Dissemination

The results of this research project are summarized in this project paper. This project paper is available in the University's library. An email was sent to the Director of the School of Social Work, who granted permission for this project

to be conducted, that the project was completed. The Director has contact information if further discussion is sought.

The MSW students who participated in this project evaluated their perceived stress level and perceived social connection. The insights gained from the evaluation enabled the students to assess their stress levels, and the impact of social connections on their stress. Although this project did not identify the exact causes that increase stress among MSW students, it confirmed much of the previous research on the topic. It also provided insights for further study that can benefit future MSW students. Instead of evaluating social connection in general, it would be beneficial to study the social connection between MSW students and how those connections potentially reduce stress. Since most students studied were employed (89%), it would be beneficial to understand how to specifically help employed MSW students decrease stress.

The results of this study will be disseminated to the School of Social Work through the submission of an electronic poster to the annual research symposium. The poster will contain information about the project and the data findings. This project will be published and recorded in the University's library giving access to anyone who wants to read the project.

Summary

This chapter explained the process for the termination of this project and the termination with the study participants. The chapter contained how the

findings were communicated, an evaluation of the impact of this project on MSW students and future MSW students, and suggestions for further study. The chapter concluded with an explanation of how the project findings will be disseminated through the University library and an electronic poster that was presented to the School of Social Work.

APPENDIX A
AGENCY LETTER

March 6, 2020

Dear Mr. Horner,

I am writing a letter of support for the IRB application of your proposed study to investigate how to reduce the stressors of online education in an MSW program. I understand you will collect this data via an electronic questionnaire sent to students currently enrolled in our online MSW program. I expect you will follow the protocols you have established and shared with me to maintain the protection of participants and their information during the study process.

Please let me know if you need any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carolyn McAllister'.

Carolyn McAllister, MSW, PhD
Associate Professor and Director
cmcallis@csusb.edu

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study, in which you are being asked to participate, is designed to investigate the following question: "How can the stress associated with completing an online MSW program be reduced?" This study is being conducted by MSW student researcher Grant Horner, under the supervision of Dr. Teresa Morris, professor Emerita School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation between stress and specific factors to determine how to reduce stress among students completing an online MSW program.

DESCRIPTION: This is a one-time survey that will take you 10 – 15 minutes to complete. The survey will ask you to complete demographic information, a stress assessment, and a social support assessment. Access to the survey is through the link. Once you complete the survey, the answers will be sent only to the researcher.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses are anonymous because no personally identifiable information will be collected, and your responses are confidential because all responses will only be seen by the researcher and reported in group form only.

RISKS: This research is considered minimal risk because there are no foreseeable overt risks. However, some people may experience slight discomfort in answering questions about stress.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Morris at tmorris@csusb.edu.

RESULTS: Results of this study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2021.

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understood the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Place an X mark here

Date

APPENDIX C
SURVEYS

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

INSTRUCTIONS: Please click on the box that most represents your answer

1. *What is your current age?* (Check one)

- 21 – 29
- 30 – 39
- 40 – 49
- 50 - 59
- 60+

2. *What is your gender?* (Check one)

- Female
- Male

3. *What year are you in the Pathway Program?* (Check one)

- 1st year
- 2nd year
- 3rd year

4. *What is your Race/Ethnicity?* (Check one)

- African-American/ Black
- Asian
- Latino
- Multiple Race/Ethnicity
- Native American
- White (Non-Hispanic)
- Other

5. *What is your relational status?* (Check one)

- Single
- Living with Partner/Spouse
- Other

6. *Do you have children under the age of 18?*

- Yes
- No

7. *Are you employed?* (Check one)

- No
- Yes

8. *If you are employed are you employed* (Check one)

- Part-time
- Full-time

* Demographic questionnaire created by the author of this paper

PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE (PSS)

INSTRUCTIONS: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts DURING THE LAST MONTH. Please enter the number that represents how you feel about each statement.

For each item choose:

0 = Never 1=Almost Never 2 = Fairly Often 3 =Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed”?	0	1	2	3
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	0	1	2	3
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	0	1	2	3
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	0	1	2	3
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	0	1	2	3
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3

Cohen, S., Kamarack, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 386-396.

Retrieved from <https://uwm.edu/mcwp/wpcontent/uploads/sites/337/2016/01/Perceived-Stress-Scale-Tip-Sheet.pdf>

**MULTIDIMENSIONAL SCALE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT
(MSPSS)**

INSTRUCTIONS: Indicated how you feel about the following statements by entering the number that represents your thoughts and feelings.

For each item choose:

1=Very Strongly Disagree 2 = Strongly Disagree 3=Mildly Disagree
4= Mildly Agree 5 = Strongly Agree 6 = Very Strongly Agree

1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. My family really tries to help me	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. My friends really try to help me	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I can talk about my problems with my family	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends	1	2	3	4	5	6

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APPENDIX D
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



May 3, 2020

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-PY2020-263

Grant Homer Teresa Morris
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Grant Homer Teresa Morris

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Decreasing the Stress Associated with Completing an Online MSW Program" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. The IRB has determined your application meets the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. The exempt determination does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-PY2020-263 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Donna Garcia

Donna Garcia, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

DG/IG

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