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COVID-19, SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND MSW STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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COVID-19 SOCIAL ISOLATION AND
MSW STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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
Cassandra Barajas

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

New literature has found that the COVID-19 pandemic has grown the prevalence of anxiety and depression amongst college students (University Communications, 2021). The purpose of this research study was to further explore how the sudden restrictions and isolation protocols enforced and caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health symptoms amongst MSW students. The study sample consisted of social work students who were 18 years old or older and who were enrolled in a Master of Social Work Program at some point in time during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

This study was conducted using a post-positivism approach and by obtaining qualitative data from interviews to determine whether the mental health of MSW students was affected during the pandemic. The data were analyzed using a bottom-up approach and axial coding to reveal common themes regarding the mental health of MSW students. Common overall characteristics that were found in this study included increased anxiety and increased depression symptoms. The study also highlights a theme of isolation, which led to the increase in mental health symptoms. This research study gives professionals further understanding of how Master of Social Work students were affected by a modern pandemic and gives a better understanding of how to support social work students experiencing similar circumstances.

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CHAPTER ONE: ASSESSMENT

Introduction

Chapter one begins by discussing the research focus of this project as well as the importance of studying MSW students' response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The paradigm and rationale for the chosen paradigm are discussed and is followed by a literature review on the topic. Lastly, this chapter states the chosen theoretical orientation and the potential contribution to social work practice and policy.

Research Focus

This was a one-stage study that sought to illuminate how the COVID-19 pandemic's social restrictions and isolation affected the mental health of masters of social work students. For the purpose of this study, the term "mental health" will primarily refer to the degrees of anxiety and depression in the MSW students' lives. This study sought to understand how sudden restrictions and isolation protocols enforced by the pandemic status affected MSW students' anxiety and depressive symptoms.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies have demonstrated that depression and anxiety amongst college students worsened (University Communications, 2021). Prior research has demonstrated that feelings of loneliness derived from restrictions and isolation can increase the risks for early deaths, substance abuse disorders, and mental health issues (Novotney, 2019;

other citations). Most college students' brains are not yet fully developed (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020); therefore, research on how a pandemic affects college students is imperative in determining interventions to use during future pandemics. This study focused on MSW student because (add your rationale for this population here).

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

The paradigm that was chosen for this research is post-positivism. Post-positivism assumes an objective reality, but its approach focuses on gathering qualitative data by interviewing and observing people in naturalistic conditions since the post-positivism paradigm assumes that quantitative data is not capable of obtaining all the information about human experiences (Morris, 2014). In post-positivism research, the researcher must strive to stay neutral and control the amount of influence they may have on the study (Morris, 2014). In this study, students who were in an MSW program during the pandemic were interviewed to explore the effects of the pandemic on their mental health..

The post-positivist approach allowed the researcher to analyze the reasons MSW students 'mental health was or was not impacted by the pandemic. The post-positivism paradigm was chosen as the paradigm to allow us to further delve into the nature of the impact of the modern pandemic due to its ability to acknowledge that everyone's experiences and perceptions are unique

Literature Review

COVID-19 is a coronavirus discovered in 2019 that primarily affects the respiratory system (CDC, 2021). COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, and the world began to shut down (Katella, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was and continues to be a major global event that many have experienced for the first time in their lifetimes, which resulted in many college and university students experiencing worsening mental health symptoms (Son et al., 2020). It is vital that we explore the severity, cause(s), and existing interventions for this issue to be able to strategize effective interventions for the future.

Prevalence

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced over four billion people into isolation (Pancani et al., 2021). According to Panchal et al. (2021), 11% of adults consistently reported symptoms of anxiety or depression between January and June of 2019. That percentage skyrocketed once the pandemic began, with 41.1% of adults reporting symptoms in January 2021 (Panchal et al., 2021). Young adults, ages 18 years to 24 years old, report symptoms of anxiety and/or depression at an average of 56% since the start of the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021). Among college students surveyed in 2021, an outstanding 9 out of 10 students reported that their mental health declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nam, 2023). Of particular note, MSW students who typically address mental health symptoms among their clients, had an increase in mental health

symptom as well with some studies indicating social workers feeling particularly stressed and emotionally drained (Weng, 2022).

Causes and Contributors

Factors that have contributed to deteriorating mental health among students include social isolation and the disruptions to their everyday lives caused by the pandemic, such as changing the way they live, interact, study, and work (Giuntella et al., 2021).

The COVID 19 pandemic brought along a variety of closures and stressors that negatively impacted many young adults' lives. Many schools were obligated to close their in-person services and resort to alternative learning methods as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This event led to college and university students to being isolated from their peers. Son et al. (2020) found that 71% of students surveyed reporting an increase in anxiety due to COVID-19 and 86% of the college students reported that their stress and anxiety was at least partially due to the mandated physical distancing and diminished social interactions (Son et al., 2020). Similarly, Leigh-Hunt et al., (2017), concluded that social isolation is correlated with worsening mental health conditions.

Various studies continue to demonstrate that the pandemic has worsened the mental health of individuals in this population and that the impacts may vary by gender. In a study on undergraduate students, females represented a higher proportion of the population that had mental health issues when compared to males (Amerio et al., 2022). This was a particularly devastating for frontline

workers like social workers since about 90% of new social workers are predominantly women who had to adapt to isolation protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wright, 2020). A study conducted by Miller & Grice-Owens (2022) examined the distress experienced by a group of social workers during COVID-19 and found that the social workers who had been working remotely due to the new protocols experienced worsened levels of distress (Miller & Grice-Owens, 2022). Similarly, a Canadian study explored the impact of the pandemic on social workers and found that social workers were experiencing mental health issues, particularly younger social workers (Alaggia et. l., 2024).

Consequences

Depression, stress, and anxiety have negative consequences on students' quality of life. According to a study by Brenes (2007), as depression and anxiety symptoms worsen, one's quality of life decreases. Deteriorating mental health leads to increased likelihood of suicide and an increased likelihood of developing other health conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, strokes, and diabetes (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2021). Depression and anxiety severely impact how one functions at work, social settings, and one's overall physical health (Brenes, 2007). Worsening mental health combined with the stress of a pandemic has negative consequences on individuals' health.

Worsening mental health conditions amongst are prevalent amongst college students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, stress can lead to being more susceptible to negative emotions, such as anger

and sadness; it can disturb their ability to concentrate or focus; it can decrease appetite or one's quality of sleep; and/or it can worsen existing mental or physical conditions (Centers For Disease Control, 2022). Additionally, 16% of adults ages 18 to 24 years old have reported having suicidal thoughts related to the Covid-19 pandemic and 25% of young adults have reported substance abuse issues (Panchal et al., 2021). The consequences of worsening mental health amongst college students include worsening physical health. The consequences of social isolation that have been recommended by health officials because of the pandemic can range from mild depressive symptoms to suicide. Since anxiety and depression can result from social isolation brought on by a pandemic, it is important to research how college students are affected so professionals can be prepared to help.

Existing research supports that COVID-19 has impacted the mental health of young adults and college students. Although limited, research on COVID-19's impact indicates that social work students experienced negative consequences, such as trouble focusing on course work, increased worries, and increased mental health concerns (Cummings et al., 2023). A study of 3,291 social work students revealed that worsening mental health during the pandemic resulted from having poor communication with their instructors and universities (Evans et al., 2021). The consequences of poor mental health can be detrimental on people's bodies. An alternative study hypothesized that during the pandemic students with more social support experienced less anxiety however no

correlation was found (Cabonse, 2022). This present study aims to further gather information and explore how MSW students' mental health has been affected specifically by the social isolation protocols that were in place due to the modern pandemic.

Interventions

There are existing interventions that individuals can utilize to diminish the feelings caused by social isolation, such as making time to stay in touch with one's friends and family using phones, video calls, texts, and emails (National Institute on Aging, 2021). Finding ways to feel connected with loved ones is important in reducing the feelings of isolation.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of many interventions that has shown positive effects in helping individuals with mental health issues. This form of therapy involves changing the way one thinks, helping individual identify and change unhelpful behaviors, and teaching individuals to act as their own "therapists" (American Psychological Association, 2017). Social isolation often leads to individuals developing worsening depressive and anxious thoughts (Son et al., 2020). Therefore, CBT is an effective intervention to change negative mindsets and help individuals remain hopeful during dire times that can lead to social isolation.

If individuals are struggling with mental health, resources should be readily available to help people cope. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that individuals should strive to care for their bodies, make time for

themselves, and connect with their communities to help with their mental health. If these suggestions are not enough, healthcare providers can recommend therapies and medications to help individuals deal with worsening mental health symptoms (Centers for Disease Control, 2022).

Conclusions

Existing research supports that COVID-19 has caused the mental health of young adults and masters of social work students to decline during the pandemic. The consequences of poor mental health can be detrimental on people's bodies and is associated with several negative outcomes, such as an increase probability of developing long term chronic illnesses like diabetes and cardiovascular disease (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2021). The present study aims to further gather information on how MSW students' mental health has been affected specifically by the social isolation protocols that were in place due to the modern pandemic.

Theoretical Orientation

This research study was primarily grounded on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theory helps us view how the development of an individual is affected by their environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model consists of five systems: microsystem, meso system, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Ettelak & Mahoney, 2017). Each system represents a level in a person's environment. For this study, the focus was on the microsystem and mesosystem. The mesosystem is the level that has the most direct contact

with the individual and it typically consists of interactions between the individual, immediate family, and friends (Ettetal & Mahoney, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provided a framework for the study because the study examined the relationship between microsystems in the mesosystem.

Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory plays a role in the study. Maslow's hierarchy of need's theory states that humans are driven to satisfy their needs in the following order: physiological need, safety needs, sense of belonging needs, self-esteem needs, and lastly their self-actualization needs (Aruma & Enwuvesi Hanachor, 2017). Over 40 million people lost their jobs at the height of the pandemic and it is estimated that 42% of lost jobs were lost forever. (Semuels, 2020). With the loss of employment, people had difficulties meeting their needs, such as food to meet their physiological needs or access to shelter. Although most, if not all, of the basic human needs were damaged to some degree during the pandemic for many individuals, the need we primarily focused on is the *need to belong*. Humans satisfy this intrinsic need by forming personal connections, relationships, and intimacy with other people. The pandemic caused people to have to isolate from friends, families, and colleagues, which restricted social contact and subsequently affected the mental health of MSW students.

Potential Contribution to Social Work Practice

The research study contributed to macro social work practice and micro social work practice. At the macro level, the study gave us further understanding on the extent of mental health damage that was caused to students experiencing

a pandemic for the first and being mandated to isolate from their peers.

Understanding the impact at a macro level allows researchers and clinicians to better help students at the micro level. At the micro level, the study can help us design methods to help individuals going through similar events in the future. For example, colleges, universities, and mental health agencies will know how to allocate resources during situations where students are experiencing hardships due to restriction protocols.

Summary

Chapter one identified the study's aim to determine how the mental health of MSW students was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also discussed the chosen paradigm: post-positivism. Next, it provided a review of the literature on the impact of the pandemic on mental health. Then it described the theoretical orientation for the study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Lastly it described the potential contributions of this study to social work practice.

CHAPTER TWO: ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Chapter two of this research proposal focuses on engagement. The study site, engagement strategies for their gatekeepers, and the self-preparation that was needed to complete this research are discussed. Furthermore, chapter two addresses any diversity, ethical, and political issues involved. Lastly, the role of technology in this research is explored.

Study Site

This research aimed to discover how COVID-19's social restriction and isolation guidelines affected the mental health of MSW students in general. The nature of this study does not require or involve a partnership with a particular agency. This study involved a series of interviews via Zoom.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Site

Because this research is being conducted independent of an agency or organization, there are no gatekeepers in the traditional sense. However, a proposed strategy to increase the number of surveys completed by MSW students was to reach out to social work students at the university and promote the study.

Supporting this study was essential to the social work profession and professions alike because it allowed us to gather data that will assist research in

discovering methods to diminish the consequences of isolation. The researcher of this study expressed the goals of the research with the goal of convincing more students to engage in the study.

Self-Preparation

The researcher initiated the study by having a formal understanding of the research existing literature and developing appropriate research questions. The researcher then determined the interview questions that were asked, making sure to be sensitive to the possibility that some participants may have barriers (e.g., difficulty discussing mental health) that may cause them to have difficulty completing the interview. Next, the researcher prepared all the research materials to begin conducting interviews. The research materials included the interview questionnaires, informed consent, and the proper software to analyze the acquired data. During the interview questionnaire development phase, the researcher ensured to remain aware of potential sensitivities the participants may have and developed methods to address them respectfully. Once all materials were acquired, the researcher proceeded to the *Implementation Phase*.

Diversity Issues

Diversity in research is an ongoing dilemma in the research community. The diversity issues were hypothesized to be likely encountered in this research study were: gender diversity issues, language diversity issues, culture diversity issues, and political diversity issues. Political diversity is worth noting because,

during the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals who belonged to major political parties had very strong emotions and opinions regarding how the pandemic was being addressed nationwide and globally.

The diversity issues that were encountered in this research study were primarily due to the usage of a convenience sample. The use of a convenience comes with the potential risk of diversity issues. In this research study, the diversity issue that arose was that no men chose to participate in the research. Participants in the study were primarily recruited from a Master of Social Work cohort within the California State University San Bernardino.

Ethical Issues

Social workers are guided by the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) which aims to assist with ethical decisions. Ethical issues that may arise include issues regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality, and potential distress. To address these ethical issues, the researcher informed each participant, both verbally and in writing, that their participation is 100% voluntary and that they may opt out at any time. To address confidentiality, no unauthorized person will have access to any of the individual pieces of information that was gathered. To address the distress that may present itself as a consequence to the mental health nature of the questions, the researcher will provide participants with a list of resources at the end of the interview.

Political Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic generated an abundance of political turmoil. Political issues could arise from this study if the research finds that the isolation and social distancing guidelines caused more harm than good or if the contrary is found as well. Strong opinions exist over both possibilities and this study may aggravate strongly political parties. To address this political issue, the researcher sought to establish common grounds that benefit the greater population, and the researcher explored strategies that had the most beneficial outcomes. An additional political issue that may present itself is that the possibility that political parties may use this research data to promote their political views on COVID mitigation measures. To address this issue, the results of the research findings explicitly state the intentions of the study and the researcher had a research supervisor review the findings to diminish the possibilities of misinterpretation.

The Role of Technology

Technology has become an essential part in research. In this study, the primary piece of technology the researcher will use is a computer. With a computer, the researcher developed and administered interviews and used video conferencing via Zoom with interviewees. A phone may also be used in order to communicate with long distance participants. Additionally, software such as Microsoft Word was used to transcribe and code interviews to identify the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Summary

Chapter two of this research began with a description of the strategies that were used in order to engage with potential gatekeepers. Next, the researcher explained how they prepared to initiate this research study. Chapter two then addressed potential diversity, ethical, and political issues that were encountered during the study. Finally, this engagement chapter discussed how technology that was used to make this research study possible.

CHAPTER THREE: IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Chapter three covers the implementation stage of this study. The study participants and their selection are addressed. Chapter three covers the data collection process, including the data's recording procedures and its analysis. To conclude chapter three, the termination of the study, and its follow up plan are addressed.

Study Participants

The purpose of the study was to determine how the recent pandemic's isolation factors affected the mental health of MSW students. To achieve this goal, the study and research instrument (interviews) was directed and promoted specifically to MSW students. MSW students participating in this study had to be 18 years old or older and must have been enrolled in an undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate course at some point during the pandemic period. This study was not limited to any race, ethnicity, sex, or gender.

Selection of Participants

The selection of interview participants was through the use of convenience sampling. Convenient sampling involved the researcher acquiring interviewees according to their accessibility and availability (Elfil & Negida, 2017). For this study, the participants were recruited from a social work cohort.

Data Gathering

This study was conducted by using a post-positivism approach to obtain qualitative data through interviews to assess how MSW students' mental health was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions asked during the interview were designed to assess the student's mental health during the pandemic compared to after to determine whether the pandemic and its isolation protocols caused any changes in their mental health. Through this approach, participants had the freedom to elaborate on how they were personally affected by the pandemic.

Phases of Data Collection

The data was collected through the participants' completion of an interview. The participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that the interview was completely voluntarily and that they could withdraw at any point in time. All the data collected during remained completely anonymous. Participants had the option to schedule their interviews via phone or via a video conferencing software, such as Zoom. During the interview, the researcher had the participants answer a series of questions regarding their mental health during the pandemic and if there was changes to that once the isolation protocols were lifted. Additionally, the participants were asked what advice they would give their past selves and what tools they used to keep help them cope. To terminate the interview, the researcher summarized what was stated and addressed any questions and feedback. The interviewees were then provided with resources to

address any consequences that may have been suffered by participating in the study.

Data Recording

The interview process involved the recording of the interview via Zoom. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and stored on a personal, password protected computer to ensure confidentiality was maintained. At the conclusion of the research study all stored data was deleted. Participants who completed the interview were assigned a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data the researcher used a bottom–up approach. This approach involved the researcher gathering qualitative information from the interviews and grouping them together to form a broad conclusion. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis and an axial coding technique to identify themes and classify patterns in the interviewees' responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to determine if the mental health of MSW students was affected by the pandemic and its isolation protocols.

Termination and Follow Up

At the end of the study, the researcher provided resources to participants to address any potential negative consequences brought on by participation in

the study. Once a participant completed their part in the study, they were thanked for their assistance. Further follow up after the study was not necessary.

Dissemination

To disseminate the research findings, the study was published on California State University San Bernardino's ScholarWorks [website](#) after the study and thesis were accepted by California State University, San Bernardino.

Summary

Chapter three discussed the implementation phase of the study. The study participants and their selection were discussed. Additionally, the data gathering process, along with its phases, recording, and analysis procedures were addressed. Lastly, chapter three discussed the termination and follow up procedures for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter four covers the findings of this research project. The data was collected through interviews of students who were masters of social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary questions asked during the interview phase can be found in APPENDIX B. Chapter four also outlines the major themes and subthemes that were found through these interviews, data analysis, and finally is followed by a chapter summary.

Data Analysis

Five individuals identified themselves as individuals who were social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants identified as females and the majority of their ages were 26-35, with the exception of two participants who were 18-25 and 41-50. All participants had an undergraduate degree and were working towards their graduate degree.

The table below (Table 1) outlines the demographic data gathered for this research. project.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=5)

Variables	N	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		.

White	1	20
African American	1	20
Hispanic	2	40
Asian	1	20
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific	0	0
Islanders	0	0
Not specified		
Age		20
18-25	1	60
26-35	3	0
36-40	0	20
41-50	1	0
51 and Older	0	0
Gender		
Male	0	0
Female	5	100
Education		
Highschool graduate or less	0	0
Some College	0	0
College+	5	100

Themes

After thorough analysis of the data, the researcher found the following themes and subthemes from the students' interviews. The table below (Table 2) outlines the themes discovered through the analysis of interviews and is followed by various quotes that supported the themes

Table 2.

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Stressors	Isolation
Mental Health	Depression Anxiety Motivation
Coping Strategies	Support System Hobbies

Stressors. The first theme involved the various stressors that MSW students reporting having due to the COVID-19 pandemic with the majority of participants being affected by the isolation protocols. This theme highlights the stressors that were exasperated due to the pandemic, the primary stressor being isolation. Interviewee 3 described the following as their most negative memory caused by the isolation mandates:

I had a family member die, during the pandemic. So that, and I couldn't... go see my family when that happened. I couldn't... I couldn't like be there

for the immediate service because it was, in Southern California so that was Definitely the most negative thing... It was because of COVID that I couldn't get out there or drive down there to Go see family (Interviewee 3, February 2024).

Interviewee 4 also reported a negative experiences caused by the isolation protocols:

We're supposed to meet everybody. Every year like the first second and third year we're supposed to meet everybody so that was something I thought we were going to do and I thought that was a cool thing because then we'd all be like part of this community. We meet each other every year and then we'd all be like part of this community... I know we try to with our group chat and stuff but I feel like it's still not the same (Interviewee 4, February 2024).

Interviewee 4 further explained that due to the isolation protocols, the social work cohort was not able to meet in person and was never able to make the connections one makes with in-person interactions.

The majority of participants proceed to explain that once the isolation mandates were relaxed and lifted, they felt better and their mental health improved. Interviewee 2 shared how they felt once the protocols were relaxed:

I would say that it [mental health] improved a lot because even though I liked being a home body having that option to get out and socialize with others in person was something that I did miss. And so now like even right

now that. They've been lifted having like a hybrid schedule where I can still go into the office and interact with clients. Or like with coworkers, I enjoy that like I enjoy those meaningful interactions that are in person (Interviewee 2, February 2024).

However, even with the newfound freedom, Interviewee 5 stated the following, "Once the restrictions lifted it felt good to be able to do kind of what you wanted, but at the same time, there's some level of anxiety there because you know the risk now that you weren't necessarily thinking about initially" (Interviewee 5, March 2024).

The majority of participants reported that isolation was a major stressor that affected their mental health. The minority reported that they actually benefitted from the isolation protocols. Interviewee 4 stated, "I felt like I benefitted from the isolation stuff. It kept me and my son at home and we didn't really interact with anybody" (Interviewee 4, February 2024).

Mental Health. The data analysis revealed mental health as an overlying theme with the subthemes of depression, anxiety, and motivation. The theme of mental health highlights the feelings of depression and anxiety that were experienced by MSW students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of participants shared that they felt their anxiety increase during the COVID-19 pandemic's isolation protocols with some reporting an increase in agitation. Interviewee 1 stated:

I was just constantly like either on autopilot or in a mood is what I used to say. Like I'm in a mood today. So, yeah... I was just always really on edge, like a lot of anxiety, a lot of like, you know, irritability. Anxiety, ruminating thoughts, all of those different things (Interviewee 1, February 2024).

Along with anxiety, some participants shared that they battled a lack of motivation. The following student shared how anxiety and lack of motivation affected them during the isolation protocols and mandates:

The motivation was a big one and then, like my anxiety in general really skyrocketed during COVID. during the pandemic So I think like I got anxiety around getting stuff done, but then like, you know, the cycle of stress and anxiety with like low motivation.

I was anxious about getting stuff done but then super unmotivated to get stuff done which would make me more anxious so yeah, I would feel I would say the lack of motivation and anxiety were the 2 biggest things in relation to being a student (Interviewee 3, February 2024).

Depression symptoms were also reported to have worsened by the three of participants.

Interviewee 1 also continued and shared their experience regarding their mental health:

I definitely was depressed during that time. But I think because there was so much fear around so many things, it was more of like a kind of like a fight or flight response. At that time, like, I don't have time to be depressed

because there's so much going on in the world. Or I have to finish my applications because at that time I was applying to a bunch of different schools... So it was a lot of just anxiety of like, will I get into the grad school or not get into grad school? Will I get COVID? Will I not get COVID? Will I die? (Interviewee 1, February 2024).

Worsened anxiety symptoms and increased depression were reported by the majority of interviewees; however, one interviewee was in the minority and shared that they did not experience severe anxiety or depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. They described their most positive memory from the pandemic as follows, "I think the most positive memory is just me having like solitude to myself... I think my thoughts... were more clear, calm" (Interviewee 4, February 2024).

Coping Strategies. The last major theme that emerged from the interviews was coping strategies. The coping strategies theme highlights the various coping strategies participants implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main subthemes were participants' support systems and their hobbies. All participants report having a strong support system and they all report using Zoom and similar tools to communicate with that system during the COVID-19 isolation mandates. Interviewee 2 describes below their most positive memory which involves their support system:

One of the most positive ones was I would say just having happy hour with my friends [via Zoom]... We would do like brunch via Zoom and a lot of

them I hadn't seen or I hadn't talked to as much... Just interacting with each other and everyone was in a different like city. There's like 12 of us... but we were all like catching up. So these are like friends that I've built since my undergrad. And it was just like a really good feeling to Interact with each other and just catch up and still like have that connection (Interviewee 2, February 2024).

Technology assisted participants with connecting with their loved ones, but that did not come without challenges. Interviewee 3 stated the following, “I tried the whole like my family did... Zoom calls, but technology was kind of like difficult with older family members, so that was a little hard” (Interviewee 3, February 2024).

Nonetheless, having a strong support system was incredibly important to the participants and assisted them with coping with isolation mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority of participants also reported implementing organizational strategies, such as planners, calendars, and schedules, and strategizing their time to help them cope with their changing environments and life demands. Other coping strategies involved participants' hobbies. Some hobbies and additional coping strategies are outlined below:

- Exercise
- Baking
- Listening to podcasts
- Gardening

- Going on walks

Some participants reported an increase in their flexibility regarding their schedule which allowed them to implement coping strategies.

What helped for me is that I was working remotely. So that gave me a lot of flexibility with my schoolwork. But I also made sure to do a lot of self-care. Whether it was going outside and going for like a walk around the lake. Of course during doing that with social distancing (Interviewee 2, February 2024).

Summary

Chapter four outlined the findings of this research study. The three major themes that emerged from the interviews included stressors, mental health, and coping strategies. The majority of interviews reported worsened motivation, anxiety, and depression symptoms. The minority reported an improvement in their motivation and stated that the COVID-19 pandemic's isolation protocols were a benefit to their mental health. Lastly, chapter four highlighted important coping strategies implemented by the participant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five summarizes and discusses the results of the findings towards the research objective: To illuminate how the COVID-19 pandemic's social restrictions and isolation affected the mental health of college students. Chapter five also explored the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, recommendations for social work practice, and lastly the conclusion.

Discussion

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory provided the framework for this research study. Bronfenbrenner's theory applied as the researcher examined how changes in the microsystem affected participants' mesosystems and Maslow's theory applied as the researcher explored how the intrinsic need to belong and have relationships was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights how participants sought their need to keep relationships to improve their mental health which aligns with Maslow's theory that humans have an intrinsic need to belong and make meaningful relationships.

Five participants were interviewed and asked to answer questions regarding how they were affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. After analyzing the data, major themes were found regarding mental health, stressors, and coping strategies. As explored in chapter 4, significant findings show that the

majority of participants experiences worsened depression and anxiety symptoms. Most of the participants reported isolation as a major component to the worsened mental health symptoms and stated their mental health significantly improved once the isolation protocols mandated by the pandemic were relaxed. This is similar to studies showing that the COVID-19 pandemic caused MSW students to experience negative consequences, such as worsened symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cummings et al., 2023). The findings of this research study support the conclusions made by the studies discussed in the literature review. For example, Giuntella et al., (2021) states that primary factors that contributed to the decline of students' mental health during the pandemic include social isolation and the disruptions to their everyday lives caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research study further supports the literature review as the majority of participants report worsened mental health symptoms caused by the isolation protocols.

This study also made contributions by highlighting some of the coping mechanisms that MSW students implemented to navigate the pandemic. This aligns with studies by Cabonce (2022), Weng (2022) and the Centers for Disease Control (2022), and highlights the importance of MSW programs need to support students by helping them engage in more self-care and showing them various coping mechanisms, especially during a pandemic.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The primary limitation is the sample size as only five participants agreed to participate in this qualitative research study which is not a large enough sample size to generalize the findings. Another limitation of the study is that all participants were female. Although the majority of social workers in the field are female, this research study was not able to gather data on how male social workers were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic isolation protocols. Last, the MSW students in the current study were diverse, so these findings may not generalize to MSW students from other programs with less diversity.

Recommendations for Research

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact is an area that still needs to be further researched. In this research study, the minority reports no adverse mental health effects caused by the pandemic's isolation protocols. Interviewee 4, a representative of the minority, shared that they are introverted individuals and did not experience severe anxiety or depression, in fact, the report to have benefitted from the isolation protocols because they felt their thoughts were calmer and clearer. On the contrary, Interviewee 5, a representative of the majority, identified as an extrovert who enjoys being around people reported feeling depressed and anxious symptoms during the isolation period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To further understand how social workers can be helped during a pandemic, further research needs to be conducted on how isolation protocols

affect introverted individuals versus extroverted individuals. Additionally, further research on how the COVID-19 pandemic and its isolation protocols affected male social workers should be conducted.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Social workers are an essential part of our society. This research study along with those found in the literature review help social workers further understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives and mental health of other social workers. It is recommended for social workers to further explore the various ways individuals and social workers were affected by the pandemic and how they were able to effectively cope with the changing environment. Social workers gaining further understanding in these areas will allow them to create better strategies to help struggling social workers and clients in the future. Lastly, it is recommended that social workers embrace research and use this study as a step to further learn about the effects of a modern pandemic on social workers' mental health.

Conclusion

Chapter five discussed the findings of this research study, the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and recommendations for social work practice. This study illuminated how the COVID-19 pandemic isolation protocols and mandates affected the mental health of masters of social work students. The results of this study demonstrated that the isolation protocols

caused the majority of MSW students that were interviewed to have worsened mental health symptoms of anxiety and depression. The study also highlighted the coping strategies these students implemented to help them cope with their changing environments which can be used by social workers under similar circumstances in the future.

APPENDIX A
HUMAN SUBJECTS TRAINING REPORT



Completion Date 07-Feb-2022
Expiration Date 06-Feb-2027
Record ID 47253185

This is to certify that:

Cassandra Barajas

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)

Social Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel
(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

California State University, San Bernardino

Not valid for renewal of certification
through CME.



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w2e59740e-a3fa-45f3-b170-ff3c5db0b9e6-47253185

APPENDIX B

MENTAL HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE

COVID-19's Effect on Mental Health: Interview Questionnaire

1. During the pandemic, did you experience any negative stressors?
2. Did you feel you tended to overact or get agitated easily?
3. What strategies did you implement in order to balance your student work with the changing environment around you?

*Motivation?
4. In what ways did the pandemic affect your mental health as a student?
5. Were you able to experience positive feelings easily?
6. What were some coping strategies that you implemented to improve or maintain your mental health?

*Support system?
7. Once isolation restrictions were lifted, how did your mental health change?
8. Can you describe the most positive memory you have during the pandemic?
9. Can you describe the most negative memory you have during the pandemic?
10. If you could share a piece of wisdom with your past self during the pandemic, what would you share?

Developed by Cassandra Barajas

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT

PURPOSE: This research study is being conducted by Cassandra Barajas, a Masters of Social Work student at CSU, San Bernardino. The study is researching how COVID-19's social restrictions and isolation rules affected the mental health of college students. Existing research supports that COVID-19 has caused the mental health of young adults and college students to worsen. The consequences of poor mental health can be detrimental on people's bodies. The present study aims to further gather information on how college students' mental health has been affected specifically by the social isolation protocols that were in place due to the modern pandemic.

DESCRIPTION: The study is divided into two parts: an anonymous survey, that will include no identifying information and an optional, confidential interview. The survey and interview will consist of questions regarding COVID's isolation protocols impacting your mental health.

PARTICIPATION: Your decision to participate or not participate in this study's activities will have no penalty of any kind. Your participation is completely voluntary and separate from any university coursework. Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time.

ANONYMOUS: The study is divided into two parts: an anonymous survey, that will include no identifying information and an optional interview, that will use fake names to keep anonymity. No personally identifiable information will be kept or used. All data obtained for the study will be downloaded into a private, password protected computer and deleted once the study is complete.

DURATION: The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete and the interview will take an estimated 20 to 45 minutes to complete.

RISKS: There is a minimal risk in participating in this study as the nature of the questions may cause you psychological disturbances. Counseling resources will be provided.

BENEFITS: The individuals who complete the survey and the interview will receive a gift card (\$5 value).

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: The interview portion of this study may involve the recording of audio. Please indicate understanding with initials.

Initials_____.

CONTACT:

If you have any questions about the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Cassandra Barajas
CSUSB School of Social Work
cassandra.barajas1575@coyote.csusb.edu

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a participant in this study, please contact:

Insert advisor's name, title, phone and email address here

RESULTS: (Include an explanation as to where the results can be obtained after you have completed your study and disseminate the results for publishing. This should not include your name or phone number, but a place and exact location (*Office and Address*) where the results can be obtained).

This study will be published at the university scholar works (<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) website and it will also be disseminated at the School of Social Work Research Symposium at the end of the academic year. You may also find the results of this study California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407 in *insert exact office here*.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

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

SIGNATURE: (Include a signature line as necessary. Note that exempt research, if truly anonymous research, should not include a signature line. Please note that Parental/Conservator informed consents require a signature line).

Example: Signature: _____ Date: _____

This study has (yet to be) been approved by the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX D
IRB APPROVAL



December 14, 2023

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2023-308

James Simon Cassandra Barajas
College of Social & B Sciences, CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear James Simon Cassandra Barajas:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "COVID-19, SOCIAL ISOLATION, AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

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. You can find the modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure forms in the Cayuse IRB System. Some instructions are provided on the [IRB Online Submission webpage](#) toward the bottom of the page. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **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-FY2023-308 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,

King-To Yeung

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

KY/MG

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