Process Groups:
Would They Enhance the MSW Student Experience?

Julie Jensen, MSW, PEL
Faculty Sponsor: Teresa Kilbane, PhD
Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work

Abstract

Due to the emotional nature of the MSW curriculum, students experience triggers, vicarious trauma and extreme stress at a higher rate than other graduate programs resulting in the need for more support. While many MSW graduate programs provide individual therapy options and some even offer integrative seminars (SWFI), there seems to be a lack of process groups offered at the graduate level for these students. Despite group work having an excellent track record for fostering self-compassion, empathy, resiliency, and mutual aid, which are ideal qualities of a helping professional, groups are not a common resource provided to MSW students. This poster presents the findings from a survey of 50 MSW students and their perceptions on the impact that process groups would have on their experience in the program.

Background

Group work is known to offset the emotional experiences that an individual experiences by helping them feel supported and validated among others who directly relate (Ying & Han, 2009). Unlike individual therapy and integrative seminars, process groups are known for being an effective method in creating a safe space that allows individuals to explore and process both intrapersonal and interpersonal emotions within a social context (Yalom & Leszcz, 2008). Given the emphasis on self-awareness and the implied requirement for social work practitioners to maintain a calm demeanor in the presence of emotionally charged situations, group work seems like a viable option to begin training future generations of helping professionals starting at the graduate level.

Purpose

This study aims to understand the perceptions of current MSW students and whether they feel process groups would enhance their experience in the graduate program. Data regarding participants' emotional experiences resulting from course content and/or their field placement(s) will be outlined to determine the need for additional supports. It will also identify current MSW students' perspectives on the emotional experiences that they encounter in the program and the level of support they feel from the current program offerings. Additionally, participants' recommendations and hesitations around process groups will be outlined.

Literature Review

Emotional Experience of the Social Work Practicum

- Disciplines like social work challenge core personal and familial beliefs enhancing more stress than traditional graduate programs (Polson & Nisa, 1998)

- The educational aspect of social work is attached to role ambiguity, conflict and heightened stress stemming from student's expectations of themselves and their perception of expectations from faculty, the school and field instruction demands, all of which often conflict with family and work expectations (Kamya, 2000)

- Students repeatedly exposed to traumatic events or stories of others are more likely to experience strong reactions of grief in the process of hearing about and witnessing the pain of others (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996)

- "The role of students' emotions in learning remains relatively unexplored and undervalued" (Varlander, 2008, p. 146)

- Learning social work is an emotional and relational experience (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003)

- When students are given the space to have their emotions validated, their awareness of themselves increases which decreases the risk of projecting their feelings and reactions onto their clients (Chung, 2010)

Method

Type of Research
- A mixed methods research study was conducted using an anonymous Qualtrics survey to gather data from a sample of MSW students who attend the same private Midwestern university
- Participants were recruited from an online Facebook group containing 193 MSW students enrolled in the same graduate program

Survey
- 19 Questions (10 Multiple Choice, 8 Short Answer, 1 Rating Scale)
- Obtained IRB approval

Sample
Size: 50 out of the 193 current MSW students in the Facebook group

Age: Participants ages ranged from 21-51 years (Mean = 27.26, SD = 5.48)

Gender Identity: Female (82%, n=41), Male (6%, n=3), Transgender (4%, n=2), Non-Binary (2%, n=1), Preferred not to say (2%, n=1)

Racial Ethnicity: Caucasian/White (72%, n=36), Hispanic/LatinX (12%, n=6), Asian American/Asian (8%, n=4), African American/Black (4%, n=2), Multi-Racial (4%, n=2)

Level in MSW Program: Second Level MSW students (82%, n=41), First Level MSW Students (10%, n=5), Advanced Standing (8%, n=4)

Specialization in Program: Schools (44%, n=22), Mental Health (28%, n=14), Children and Families (12%, n=6), Health (10%, n= 5), Leadership and Development (6%, n=3)

Sub-Specialization in Program (N=13): Group work (10%, n=10), Gero Ed (2%, n=1), Migration Studies (2%, n=1), CADC (2%, n=1).

Results

Emotional Experience During Program
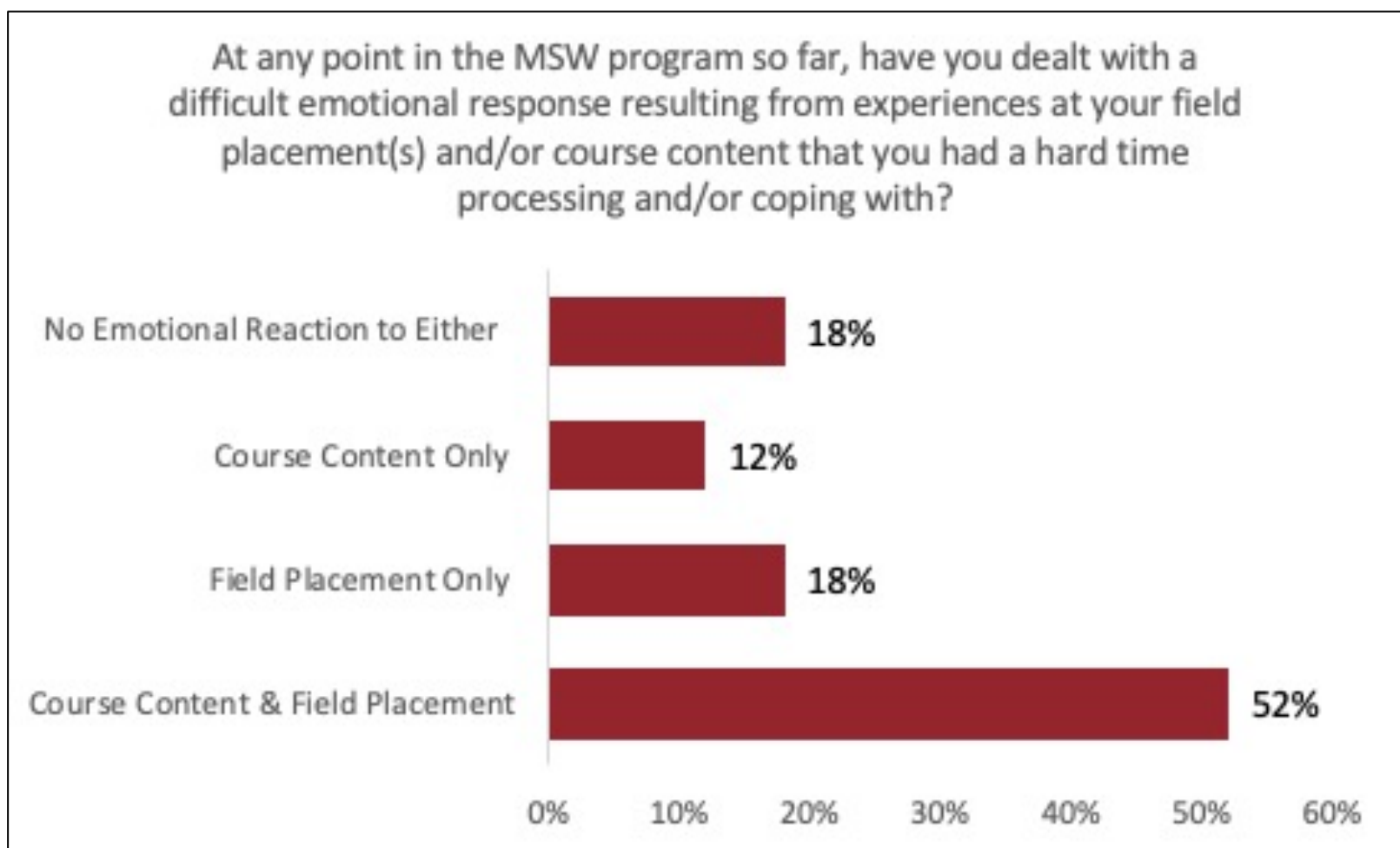
Students were asked if a difficult emotional response was evoked while in the MSW program. 82% felt such a trigger, approximately half replying both in their course work and field placement(s) (see table above).

Perceptions Regarding Level of Support

Support	Range	Mean	Median	n	% of sample
Peers (within the program)	1-10	7.98	8	40	80%
Peers (outside of the program)	2-10	7.47	8	36	72%
Field Supervisor(s)	2-10	7.38	8	39	78%
Course Professors	2-10	6.98	7	41	82%
Field Liaison(s)	0-10	5.68	6	37	74%
SWFI Course	0-10	5.1	6	38	76%
Academic Advisor	0-10	3.57	3	30	60%
Wellness Clinic	0-10	2.81	1.5	16	32%
Student Services	0-8	2.5	2	20	40%

All participants were asked to rate on a scale from 0-10 regarding how supported they felt during their time in the program from the person or program provided. The highest rated level of support came from peers within the program, peers outside of the group, and field supervisor(s) (see table above).

Perceptions on Adding Process Groups to Program
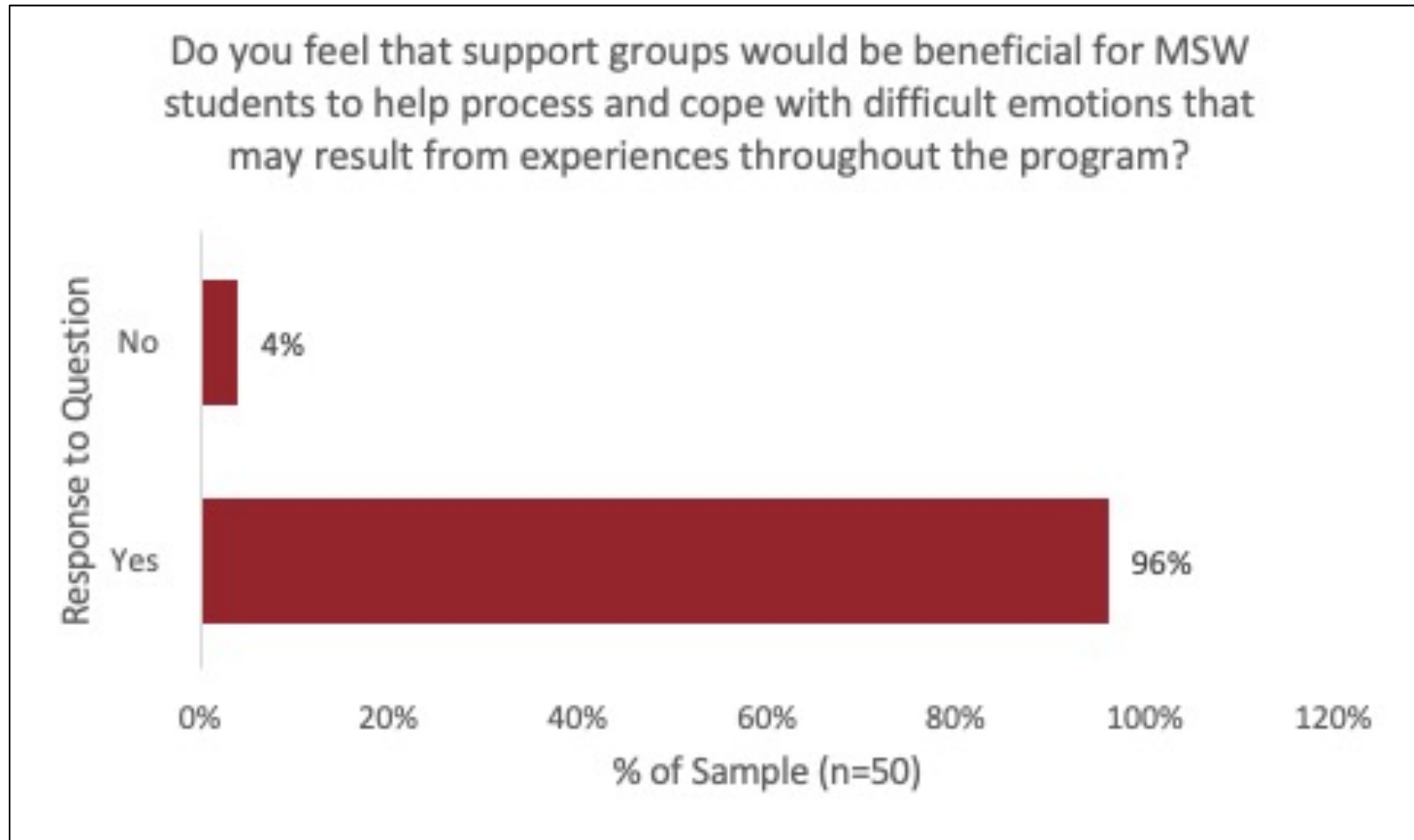
All participants were provided this question (n=50). Data indicates that 96% (n=48) of MSW students feel that having process groups would help them emotionally cope with difficult circumstances that occur throughout the program. Despite the 18% (n=9) of the sample indicating they did not experience an emotional response, only 4% (n=2) of students did not feel like process groups would be beneficial. Thus, process groups may be beneficial for other reasons beyond what this survey examined.

Benefits of Process Groups (N=41)

Themes	Frequency	% of Sample
Sense of Belonging	21	51.2%
Support	20	48.8%
Process Emotions	12	29.3%
Consultation	8	19.5%
Decrease Isolation	7	17.1%
Total	68	-

Only participants who answered "Yes" (N=41) to having experienced an emotional response from at least one occurrence in the program were asked to explain why they would participate in a process group. This was a short answer question; therefore, themes were used to summarize the data. Since the participants were allowed to have more than one response, the percentages do not add up to 100%. Data indicates that majority of students feel that being part of a process group during their time in the program would help them feel a sense of belonging and support (see table above).

Barriers to Process Groups (N=50)

Themes	Frequency	% of Responses
Time	23	46%
Balance	9	18%
Fear of Rejection	8	16%
Access	7	14%
Facilitator/Group Size	4	8%
Confidentiality	4	8%
Total	55	-

All participants (N=50) were asked to share any barriers that may prevent them from participating in a process group. This was a short answer question; therefore, themes were categorized to summarize the data. Since the participants were allowed to have more than one response, the percentages do not add up to 100%. Overall, time is the largest concern for students to join a group (see table above).

Other Considerations for Group (N=41)

Themes	Frequency	% of sample
Safe Space	10	24.4%
Leader qualifications	8	19.5%
Sensitive to differences	6	14.6%
Confidentiality	4	9.8%
Educational	4	9.8%
Code of Conduct	4	9.8%
Boundaries	2	4.8%
Nothing else to add	5	12.2%
Total	43	-

Only participants who answered "Yes" (N=41) to having an emotional experience in the program were asked to share any additional factors that they hope would be taken into consideration during the formation of the process groups; therefore, themes were categorized to summarize the data. Since the participants were allowed to have more than one response, the percentages do not add up to 100%. Overall, the top three themes included having the group be a safe space, having a leader who is qualified to facilitate, and that the groups being sensitive to differences (see table above).

Suggested Process Group Mechanics
Data suggests that MSW students in this sample believe the following process group format would be ideal for supporting their emotional needs while in the program.

Formation of Groups: Assignment based on similar emotional experiences (56.10%, n=23)
Location of Groups: Virtual sessions (47.20%, n=25)
How often: Bi-weekly (48.78%, n=20)
Facilitation: Peer lead (43.64%, n=24)
Format of Groups: Open (65.85%, n=27)
Membership: 5-10 Members per group (68.29%, n=28)
Length of Groups: Ongoing (73.17%, n=30)

Conclusion

The findings of this study align with previous literature regarding the intense emotional nature of the social work field and the need for more support at the graduate level. The data indicates that majority of the MSW students in this study experienced at least one emotional response resulting from either course content and/or an event at their field placement(s). To cope with these experiences, peers within the program were ranked highest as a means of support. They were also the favored choice for group leadership if process groups were made available to students. Overall, MSW students seem to be craving a sense of belonging and emotional support during their time in the program due to the emotional portion of the experience. The current supports offered by the university were ranked low while almost the entire sample indicated that process groups would be valuable. Given the data from this study, process groups seems like something MSW graduate programs should consider offering.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. The first being the race and gender bias. Most participants identified as a Caucasian female. While a common occurrence in the social work field, this can create a gender and racial bias and make the data less generalizable. Time was also a factor that may have impacted this study. Data collection was done at the end of the semester which is typically a busy time for students due to finals. A larger number of students may have participated had the survey been offered earlier in the semester. Lastly, it is also important to note that this study took place during the Covid-19 pandemic making it a unique time to gather data on emotional experiences and the need for additional supports. Given that emotions were generally at a higher state than normal, this may have impacted the data in many ways.