

The Cohort Model in MSW Programs: A Supportive Model Mitigating Burnout

Jourdan Archambault, Emma Clarke, Natalie Lembeck, Kristen Tyler,
Kristina Lind, PhD, LICSW-NH (Faculty Sponsor)
Department of Social Work, Western Carolina University



ABSTRACT

The Impact of burnout has been studied extensively in social work. There has been less emphasis on the study of burnout in MSW programs using a cohort model. This study explores whether or not a cohort model mitigates or spreads burnout among social work students.

METHODS

- **Study Design:** Qualitative and phenomenological – utilized a measurement tool (Qualtrics) comprised of demographics, Likert-scale items on experiencing burnout and how the cohort model might help or hinder its impact.
- Terminology like cohort, sense of community, and burnout were defined in the survey questions
- The 5 Likert scale items used as a vehicle to promote discussion among the accompanying open-ended questions included such areas as: experience in the cohort, sense of community in the cohort, experience with conflict in cohort, level of burnout in the program, degree to which cohort influences burnout.
- **Convenience Sample:** of MSW students at a rurally based state university
- $n=67$ MSW students, representing a 48% response rate
- **Thematic analysis** was used to analyze responses via an inductive coding approach

RESULTS

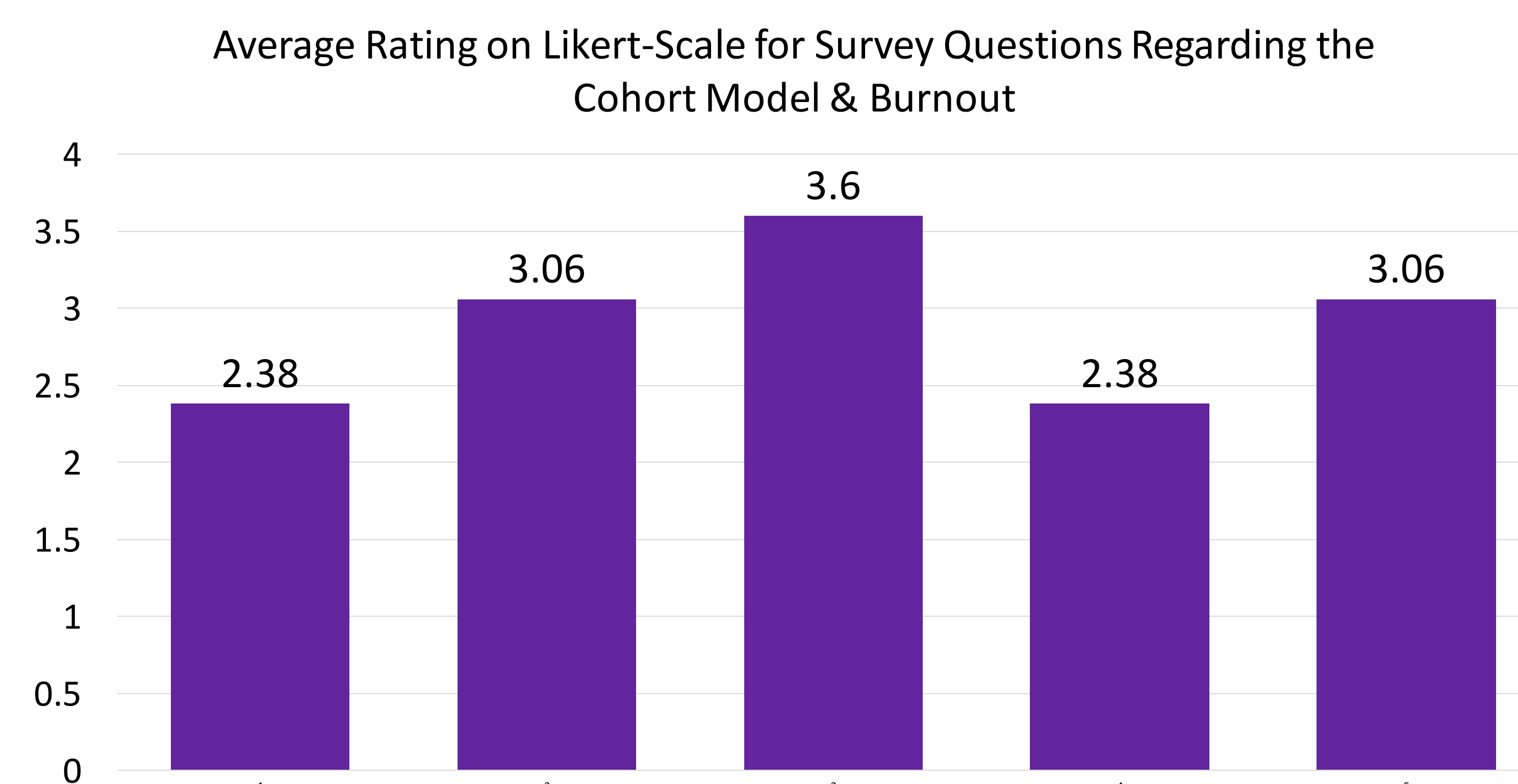
Themes that Emerged in Thematic Analysis:

- Cohorts assist fellow cohorts in building connections, feeling comfortable in their educational setting, and experiencing solidarity.
- Cohorts create an environment where students report drama, stress, and interpersonal dissonance.

RESULTS

Themes that Emerged in Thematic Analysis Continued:

- Cohorts do not create a sense of community due to the actions of individuals in the cohort, including the development of cliques.
- Conflict is inevitable in cohort settings with students reporting gossip and poor conflict resolution, but this does not necessarily limit success and sometimes may create a more resilient cohort;. Conflict occurs due to the behaviors of specific individuals in a cohort, including monopolizing class discussion, monopolizing time, and through a lack of introspection.
- The institutional structure of the program and assignments influence high levels of burnout, although some cohort members did not experience burnout from these sources due to external factors..
- Burnout was easier to manage with the assistance of group work, personal connections, and a cohort environment.
- Cohorts provide a sense of solidarity through positive interactions and mutual struggling to lessen the spread of burnout.
- Cohorts exacerbate the feelings of burnout through negative experiences within the cohort and additional stressors.



The graph above displays the average of the responses to each of the 5 Likert-scale questions in the survey. From left to right Q1 asked about the experience of the cohort; Q2 asked about the sense of community; Q3 asked about the experience with conflict; Q4 asked about burnout; Q5 asked about the spread of burnout.

Q1-Q4 had Likert scales with 0=extremely bad; 4=extremely good and Q5 had Likert scales with 0=no spread at all and 4=a great deal of spread.

DISCUSSION

Discussion:

- The cohort model can either positively or negatively influence conflict and burnout. On the one hand, the cohort model has been helpful in building connections among students thus limiting the impact of burnout. At the same time, some cohort member behaviors can disrupt those feelings of connections. The added tensions resulting from some of these behaviors seem to intensify feelings of burnout.

Limitations:

- No specific definition for conflict was provided.
- Researchers of this project were students of one of the cohorts being surveyed.
- This was a small pilot study (N=67) limited to one school in Appalachian region, which lacked diversity
- Question 3 experienced a coding issue in which the numeric option '3' on the Likert scale was not available to survey respondents

Recommendations:

- Recommend that MSW programs pay attention to the wellbeing of the cohort model to see where they might need to intervene.
- Recommend faculty supported mutual aid groups as an intervention to deal with conflict within a cohort model.
- Recommend faculty offer an orientation to newly admitted cohorts which includes strategies to mitigate burnout, to encourage professional skills, and to implement self-care.
- Recommend faculty interview prospective students for admission to the graduate program

REFERENCES & INQUIRIES

Please see handout for full list of references and contact information for any questions.