

Latinx Social Work Students' Well-Being Prior to and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Leyla Feize

Abstract: This is a reflection on social work students' well-being before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This narrative was indirectly written by the students, as it is their interpretations of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors derived from drawing their own mandalas daily for one month. It is a comparison of two stories of struggle, hope, and change during two different periods which were close in time, but far in reality.

Keywords: student well-being, COVID-19 pandemic, mandalas

As a social work educator, students' well-being has always been my concern, often more than their academic performance. In each class that I teach, I find a way to promote their well-being. In my interprofessional elective class "Introduction to Play, Art and Music Intervention" (PAMI), a collaboration between the School of Social Work and the School of Music, I have more opportunities to facilitate students' explorations of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and in general, of their "self." In this class, after discussing Carl Jung's (1875–1961) theory and the role of mandala in his theory, students were asked to complete a mandala assignment. For the purpose of clarification, prior to explaining the students' assignment, I will briefly describe Carl Jung's theory and the concept of mandala.

The main concept of Carl Jung's theory is psyche, which consists of both the conscious and unconscious (Swan-Foster, 2016). Stevens (1990) explains how we discuss psyche as if it is a real structure, however, it is only a mental structure and a metaphor. Psyche is a dynamic system, and flowing psyche energy in both the conscious and unconscious creates harmony and self-regulation (Swan-Foster, 2016). Access to the unconscious and integrating its contents with the conscious makes the psyche healthy. A mandala, a circular diagram, represents the universe and is a bridge to the unconscious. It reveals psyche's movements in the conscious and unconscious (Swan-Foster, 2016). Jung used mandalas to heal himself and his patients (Stevens, 1990; Swan-Foster, 2016). Mandalas have been used to reduce stress, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms. Theoretically, drawing mandalas facilitates organizing the mind of a traumatized person and yields meaning to their emotiofnal experiences; drawing mandalas decreases the symptoms of trauma (Henderson et al., 2007). However, even if it does not improve trauma related symptoms, researchers reported that both experimental and control groups became relaxed and enjoyed the experience (Henderson, 2010; Pizarro, 2004). The goal of this reflection was to explore social work students' "self" and well-being. Mulcahy (2013), a nurse educator, used mandalas to explore the "self" of her students and asserted: "There is nothing to prove, and there is nobody to please; the mandala comes from within you, from your own creative self, therefore it is worthy work" (p. 212).

The students were asked to draw a mandala each day for the duration of one month. They were also supposed to write an interpretation of each drawing. In the beginning, students were hesitant and did not see any possible benefits of the experiential learning activity; however, after

a few drawings, they started to like the activity. At the end of the month, students learned to connect to their “self” and disclosed that they would continue to draw mandalas.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the world and affected people’s mental health, including that of our students. In order to explore social work students’ well-being during the pandemic, I decided to compare their mandalas before and during the pandemic. I compared social work students’ mandalas from spring 2019 and spring 2021. The class was not offered in spring 2020. In total, 240 self-interpreted mandalas were analyzed through content analysis: 120 mandalas of the 6 social work students in the PAMI class of spring 2021 were compared to 120 mandalas of the 6 students in the PAMI class of spring 2019. A few students were from disciplines other than social work, and they were excluded in this reflection. The class is offered at both undergraduate and graduate levels; however, typically graduate students register for the class. All the students were from the Latinx population, and 75 percent of the students were female, the latter which is common in nearly all social work classes. The students’ explanations and interpretations of their mandalas prior and during the pandemic were categorized on an excel sheet. Each sentence was placed under the three categories of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Similar sentences were combined, and all findings reported.

Social Work Students’ Feelings Prior to the Pandemic

The students elaborated on their positive feelings and mentioned that they enjoyed nature. They wrote about their success and growth at school, being on the right track, and feeling free to choose their career path. They felt pleased about their childhood memories and their supportive family and people around them. The students felt relaxed and content without having any particular reason. They reported feelings of calmness, gratefulness, peacefulness, and positivity. The students also described their negative emotions and stress. Their sources of stress were school assignments and practicum responsibilities. One student mentioned that “My frustration, sadness, stress and happiness all are in harmony.” All students elaborated on how drawing mandalas made them feel relaxed, calm, and balanced. As one student mentioned: “I was so relaxed after drawing as if I was in a garden full of flowers,” and another stated: “I was so relaxed after drawing and had a guilty pleasure as if I should not have done it.”

Social Work Students’ Feelings During the Pandemic

All students reported being worried, overwhelmed, and stressed. They were afraid of getting close to people, catching COVID-19 and dying, and worried about the possibility of their family members becoming infected and dying as well. They were feeling pressured by the media and news on COVID-19 and were overwhelmed with ordinary tasks at home, at the workplace, and at school. They felt trapped in an uncertain state. Students reported being upset and angry about the situation and of politicizing people’s health. They also stated having positive feelings, such as happiness. They felt thankful simply for being alive and having basic necessities such as food, electricity, the internet, and their homes. They reported that drawing mandalas made them content and brought peace of mind to them. They felt inspired, passionate, alert, and creative, and had a tendency to help and protect others, as well as to be productive and create new ways and approaches. The students also reported mixed feelings of sadness and happiness, and often a

spectrum of different feelings and were surprised to experience various feelings at once. They reported physical symptoms of fatigue, difficulty focusing, and sleeping excessively.

Social Work Students' Thoughts Prior to the Pandemic

The students' thoughts were organized around their Mexican roots and culture and how they could integrate them in their daily lives and had thoughts around migrant and vulnerable workers and ways they could advocate for them. They focused on how they could grow and broaden their views to connect better to people. Students also thought about their licensure exam and future careers. Family conflicts and their inner conflicts regarding cultural and religious beliefs were also occupying their minds.

Students' Thoughts During the Pandemic

Students mentioned wishful thinking such as floating in the waves of the ocean, or an enjoyable day in a forest. They often brought past pleasant memories to the present mind, such as childhood memories of being carefree or their past joyful family time. They were also focused on spirituality and religiosity, and on the meaning of life, citing how short and fleeting it is.

Students' Positive and Negative Behaviors Prior to the Pandemic

The students' positive behaviors included connecting to nature and enjoying its beauty, for example watching the sunset. They cultivated their spirituality by going to church and working on their personal growth. As one student mentioned: "I am floating through life." The students' negative behaviors centered around the struggle and frustration of finding balance between spending time with their family, work responsibilities, and school assignments.

Students' Positive and Negative Behaviors During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, students found nature soothing and took care of plants, flowers, and trees. They would also pay more attention to nature, taking note of the sky, wind, and sun. For instance, some enjoyed counting the stars. Other sources of their tranquility were practicing yoga, walking, writing in journals, listening to music, and exploring and remembering their old interests. They focused on their progress and assertiveness as well. As one student mentioned: "During the pandemic, I learned that there is nothing to be afraid of and practiced assertiveness." All students mentioned that their main source of emotional support was connection. Spending time with their family members and friends and strengthening their relationships comforted them the most.

Students also elaborated on their negative behaviors such as being in a hurry, being impatient, being demanding, and looking for constant attention. They explained that they displaced their fear, anxiety, and anger to their family members—often arguing with them, making poor decisions, and damaging their relationships.

As previously mentioned, the pandemic caused numerous and often contradictory feelings, thoughts, and behaviors among this sample of social work students. Awareness of the contradictory nature of crisis-related reactions and focusing on the positive aspects such as creativity, responsibility, spirituality, and human connection can assist with a more inclusive intervention.

Conclusion

Students explored their psyche by drawing mandalas, which allowed them to connect their conscious to their subconscious and unconscious and became more aware of their “self.” This group of social work students’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors prior to and during the pandemic were evidently different. During the pandemic, they were not as happy and relaxed as they were pre-pandemic. Their sources of stress also changed. However, during the pandemic, they used resources that they knew and were familiar with such as nature, family ties, and spirituality to cope with the crisis and survive. In the pre-pandemic, their reality, such as personal and cultural conflicts, vulnerable migrant workers, and school and family balance, was prominent. The pandemic seemed to broaden students’ views, change their priorities, and drive them to search for the meaning of life. They were aware of the role of family ties, but during the crisis, they realized that human connection is vital to survival, and not just a privilege. They learned to appreciate their lives and create and celebrate simple happiness. The realization of the shortness of life empowered them to overcome their fears of their inadequacies and of the obstacles to success. The crisis enriched their sense of creativity to solve their own and others’ problems.

Social work students often learn how to intervene during crisis. These students have themselves been experiencing how to live and work during a crisis. It appears that they played both the roles of a client and a practitioner simultaneously. The pandemic was an ongoing crisis at least for two years and the long-term effect on our students is unknown. The pandemic might frame a new reality for social work students, which is worth exploring further.

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About the Author: Leyla Feize, PhD, LCSW-S is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, TX (leyla.feize@utrgv.edu).