

ABSTRACT

SELF-CARE PRACTICES OF FRESNO STATE MSW TITLE IV-E STUDENTS

This study explored the lived experiences of MSW Title IV-E students in graduate school, including their stress levels and self-care practices. There were four themes that emerged from this study: (a) graduate school is stressful, (b) limited curriculum on self-care, (c) practicing self-care, and (d) challenges of self-care. The findings for this study showed that MSW students would benefit from additional support in their graduate program to incorporate self-care into their lives. These practices can help lower or manage their stress level before entering the profession of child welfare upon graduation. If students were able to gain knowledge and practice on incorporating self-care, they may be better prepared to lower their risk of burnout, secondary trauma, and other negative factors that current child welfare workers experience.

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SELF-CARE PRACTICES OF FRESNO STATE MSW TITLE

IV-E STUDENTS

by

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APPROVED

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Social workers, particularly those who work in child welfare, experience high levels of stress due to the nature of their job (Boyas, Wind, & Ruix, 2015). Stress often has been caused by several factors: the high number of clients assigned to the social worker, long work hours, and exposure to secondary trauma that contribute to the social workers' burnout (Salloum, Kondrat, Johnco, & Olson, 2015). In order to lower or better manage stress, social workers need to incorporate self-care (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Salloum et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). Given this potential occupational hazard, social work students need to be encouraged to use self-care in preparation for entering the profession (Moore, Bledsoe, Perry, & Robinson, 2011). This qualitative research study sought to understand the stress levels and use of self-care by Fresno State graduate level social work (MSW) students who are enrolled in the Title IV-E Stipend Program.

The Title IV-E Stipend Program provides bachelor and master level students with a specialized curriculum to educate and expand their knowledge of public child welfare. Full-time MSW students receive a stipend, approximately \$37,000 (\$18,500 each year) to pay for their schooling. Part-time MSW students, who are currently employed with the Department of Social Services, receive financial support to pay for their tuition, textbooks, and reimbursed for traveling to school or internship. In return, students must commit to working in public child welfare upon graduation for two years. There are currently 22 accredited schools who offer the Title IV-E program to their graduate students (California Social Work Education Center, 2016).

The chapter will begin by exploring the scope of the issue around self-care in the social work field, proposing the purpose of the study and research question, and providing an overview of the literature that examine the level of stress faced by social workers and MSW Title IV-E students in the field, the theoretical framework for the study, and the research methodology.

Scope of the Problem

There have been few studies that have researched the use of self-care among social work students (Moore et al., 2011). Researchers have found that when students incorporate self-care in their daily lives, they were better equipped to manage or lower their stress levels and advance their professional development (Moore et al., 2011, Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). The Title IV-E program specifically prepares social work students to work in public child welfare through specialized training and seminars (California State University, Fresno, n.d.). However, there is a paucity of studies conducted specifically with MSW Title IV-E students that examine their use of self-care.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The aim of this phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Title IV-E social work students who are enrolled in the Fresno State MSW program. This study specifically focuses on their stress levels during graduate school and how they lower or better manage those stressors by their use of self-care, if at all. This study will collect information from MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State to answer the following question: What is the experience of MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State in their experience of stress in graduate school? The related research question will be: What role, if any, does self-care play in the lives of MSW Title IV-E graduate students in managing stress?

Identification of the Research Problem

The social work profession has been universally recognized as a highly demanding career (Bressi & Vaden, 2016). Unfortunately, social workers that currently work in child welfare are at a heightened risk of developing stress due to high caseloads, long hours, lengthy paperwork, inadequate salaries, and limited support (Boyas et. al, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2013). In addition to stress, child welfare workers are also at-risk for developing secondary trauma, known as the development of posttraumatic stress disorder systems when working with clients who have experienced trauma, which

can cause harmful effects on a social worker's career, including burnout (Salloum et al., 2015). In order to cope with stress and decrease their risk of burnout, it has been recommended that social workers incorporate self-care (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Salloum et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). Self-care is defined as activities that promote a person's overall well-being. These activities can be incorporated into a person's personal or professional life, as long as it leads to positive outcomes (Lee & Miller 2013). A few examples of self-care may be activities such as engaging in outdoor activities, cooking, attending therapy, or seeking the support from colleagues or supervisors (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). However, it has been suggested that self-care should be developed early in a social worker's career, specifically during graduate school in preparation of entering the social work field (Moore et al., 2011).

Like social workers in the field, social work students experience stress, especially in graduate school (Moore et al., 2011). Students, who are given the opportunity to have field experience, may often be subjected to stress comparable to social workers since they are working with similar types of clients (Moore et al., 2011). Therefore, self-care becomes an important and vital tool that should be encouraged and developed early in a graduate student's career in preparation to entering the social work field (Moore et al., 2011, Napoli & Bonifas, 2011).

Social work students are able to manage their stress by incorporating various forms of self-care. This can be accomplished by exercising, journal, attending counseling, and building a strong support system (Moore et al., 2011). Self-care may also be integrated into the graduate curriculum. For example, students can learn mindfulness practice, which is the development of empathic skills towards their clients and themselves (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). If a student is able to be empathic towards themselves and become more accepting of their current situation, they can strengthen their resiliency (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). In addition, they can also be taught to look out for warning signs of compassion fatigue and thus, develop their own self-care plan (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014).

Though it has been strongly suggested that social work students develop self-care techniques to manage their stress levels, teaching the use of self-care has often not been included into the social work curriculum (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). If students are unable to properly use self-care, failure to utilize such practices may put them at-risk for secondary trauma, burnout during their career, and chronic illness (Moore et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding theoretical framework will be used in this study to gain an understanding on how social work graduate students may experience stress and how stress potentially limits their ability to meet their needs. In addition, the study will discuss how self-care can be used in order to help manage stress and allow students to meet those needs.

In 1943, Maslow developed a five-tier hierarchy of needs model that is fueled by an individual's motivation (Gobin, et al., 2012). In order to move from one stage to the next stage, a person must satisfy their need at their current stage (Harrigan & Commons, 2015). The five stages are: (1) psychological, (2) safety, (3) belongingness and love, (4) esteem and (5) self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). An individual's process through the stages can be halted at any point by life experiences (Taormina & Gao, 2013). For graduate students, they often make sacrifices in their personal relationships in order to meet the demands of school (Bonifas & Napoli, 2014). This unmet need during the belongingness and love stage, can make it difficult for students to move up to the esteem and self-actualization stages (Bonifas & Napoli, 2014).

Methodology

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with four participants, two male and two female Fresno State MSW Title IV-E students. To recruit participants, an email was sent to MSW students where currently enrolled in the program. The email provided a description of the study, criteria

to participate in the study, and the researcher's contact information. Once participants were established, they were provided with a consent form that discuss the purpose of the study, highlights of potential risks and benefits, and an explanation that their participation in the study was voluntary. Next, the participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that inquired their experiences as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student, their experience with stress, how they were able to incorporate self-care practices, and their perceived benefits and challenges in applying self-care practices. Once the interviews were complete, each interview was transcribed verbatim. Once transcribing was complete, the data was analyzed through NVivo, a program which aids in the finding of common themes throughout the participant's answers.

Summary

This study sought to understand the lived experience of Fresno State MSW Title IV-E students about their stress and their use of self-care. The research questions for this study will seek to identify types of self-care practices used by social work students and how such practices help manage their stress levels. The following chapter will review the theoretical and empirical literature regarding use of self-care practices by graduate students. Furthermore, a brief discussion will include present gaps in the literature.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work is known as a profession whose primary mission is to help individuals, families and the community (Bressi & Vaden, 2016) with special attention to serving vulnerable populations of people (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). The goal of social work practice is rooted in six core values that are outlined in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. The values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). These core values provide uniqueness to the social work profession by setting ethical standards on how social workers should act (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

This chapter explores the importance of self-care in social work practice, specifically for those in child welfare due to their exposure to high levels of stress. The focus will center on the importance of developing self-care, especially during the social work student's graduate education in preparation to entering the field. Theoretical literature will be used to explore what may inhibit social work students from practicing self-care and how self-care can be a useful tool that they can develop and take with them into their career. Lastly, this chapter will examine the gaps found throughout the literature on the implementation of self-care practices in a social work student's life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gain an understanding of the lived educational experiences of full-time and part-time Fresno State Title IV-E graduate social work students. This study will explore the challenges graduate social work students face while completing their graduate program and how they manage their stress levels through the incorporation of self-care practices, if at all. The lived experiences of the graduate students will be generally defined as stress experiences during

graduate school in social work and how self-care has or has not been incorporated. The study will attempt to answer the following questions: “What is the lived experience of graduate level Title IV-E social work students of stress in graduate school?”; as well as, “What role does self-care play in the lives of Title IV-E graduate level social work students in managing stress during graduate studies?”

Theoretical Framework

The Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs will be used as the guiding theoretical framework to understand how stress affects social work graduate students’ ability to meet their needs and how the use of self-care can be utilized as a helpful tool to lower or manage their stress. In 1943, Maslow developed the hierarchy of need model to understand what motivates people (Maslow, 1943). These motivations may be driven by the individual’s values, goals, or biological needs (Gobin, Teeroovengadam, Becceea, & Teeroovengadam, 2012). As a five-tier model, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of need includes the following stages starting at the lowest level: (1) psychological, (2) safety, (3) belongingness and love, (4) esteem and (5) self-actualization. The first three lower needs are referred to as deficiency needs, while the two upper levels are referred to as growth needs (Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton & Bergen, 2012). In order to move through each level, a person must satisfy their need during their current stage (Harrigan & Commons, 2015). People can complete each stage and reach the level of self-actualization, however, the process may be halted due to life experiences, such as illness or divorce, causing individuals to move back and forth between the different stages (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

Starting with the physiological need, this stage is described as the basic human need, which includes food and water (Harrigan & Commons, 2015; Taormina & Gao, 2013). The second stage is the need for safety (Maslow, 1943). An individual’s needs may be threatened in a variety of ways, for instance, through assault, disease or natural disasters or due to financial reasons such as job loss or lack of medical insurance (Taormina & Gao, 2013). Maslow (1943) stated that achieving safety allows an

individual to attain stability within their society. The third stage, known as the social need, focuses on belongingness, affiliation and acceptance, preferably by one or more groups (Harrigan & Commons, 2015). This stage includes belonging to religious groups, clubs, or living with a family (Gobin et al., 2012). Research has shown that graduate students often make sacrifices in maintaining relationships in order to obtain academic success (Bonifas & Napoli, 2014). The need to focus on their studies can make it difficult for them to maintain previous level of socialization during graduate school (Bonifas & Napoli, 2014). The fourth stage, which focuses on esteem, is when an individual completes a task or goal and receives recognition and respect from others as well as how they view themselves (Gobin et al., 2012). Lastly, self-actualization occurs when an individual discovers their potential and achieves self-fulfillment (Gobin et al, 2012). Maslow (1943) has stated that very few people attain this stage. This stage may be difficult for graduate social work students to achieve due to the stress and demands of their academics. However, self-care may be used as a tool to help students fulfill their needs according to Maslow's model.

Stress in Social Work

Social work is known to be a rewarding profession, which also can produce high stress due to the nature of their work (Kapoulitas & Corcoran, 2015). When stress occurs in the workplace, it is described as a person's response, either emotionally or physically, to the demands of their work environment (Arrington, 2008). When social workers experience small amounts of stress, it can serve as a source of motivation. However, when stress levels begin to rise, it can begin to take a toll on a social worker's performance (Arrington, 2008). Their work environment demands that social workers take on heavy workloads with challenging or difficult clients, working long hours, and accepting poor compensation for their services (Arrington, 2008; Shier, Graham, Fukuda, Brownlee, Kline, Walji, & Novik, 2012). Hence, many social workers may feel that they are unable to complete their tasks due to their working

condition contributing to less-than-optimal work performance, which may include decreased concentration and flawed cognitive functioning among other symptoms of burnout (Arrington, 2008).

Child Welfare Workers

In social work, child welfare workers work closely with vulnerable populations, including children, youth and families. Their primary role is to ensure that children are not at-risk for abuse by strengthening the family system through beneficial services to address their specific needs. The overall goal of child welfare is to prevent abuse, intervene when abuse occurs, and provide treatment to those involved (National Association of Social Workers, 2013).

Child welfare social workers face several challenges that put them at a heightened risk for developing high levels of stress. Their stress levels are often caused by their high caseloads, long hours, lengthy paperwork, inadequate salaries, and limited support (Boyas, Wind, & Ruix, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2013). Unfortunately, many child welfare agencies are unable to hire additional staff to change these conditions due to limited funding and budget cuts (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010). In more extreme circumstances, child welfare workers sometimes experience stress through the fear of violence-where they are exposed to unsafe and unpredictable environments that include potential verbal and physical assaults (Douglas, 2013; National Association of Social Workers, 2013) or through the death of a child (Douglas, 2013).

Along with the high stress levels sustained by the child welfare profession, social workers are also at risk for developing secondary trauma. Secondary trauma, also known as compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma, has been commonly found in the helping profession, especially within the field of child welfare (Salloum, Kondrat, Johnco, & Olson, 2015). Secondary trauma is described as psychological distress and the development of symptoms related to posttraumatic stress that occurs when working with clients who have experienced trauma (Kapoulitas & Corcoran, 2015; Newell &

Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Salloum et al., 2015). Posttraumatic symptoms include avoidance, sleep disruption, exhaustion, fear and an increase in anxious moods (Salloum et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). Research has found that approximately 34%-50% of child welfare workers have experienced high forms of secondary trauma (Salloum et al., 2015).

Secondary trauma has been known to have harmful effects on a social worker's career as a leading factor to burnout (Salloum et al., 2015). Burnout was first defined by Freudenberger (1971) as the process of becoming exhausted by extreme demands. For the purpose of this study, burnout will be defined as emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion from the exposure of working closely with vulnerable populations (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). In addition to overall exhaustion, burnout also causes depersonalization, which results in the loss of one's identity and/or a decrease in feeling of personal accomplishment in their work (Ying, 2009). Other symptoms of burnout include the development of negative attitudes toward a client, which can have a detrimental impact on the quality of services provided by the social worker experiencing burnout or stress (Salloum et al., 2015).

It is imperative to recognize that secondary trauma and burnout rates within child welfare can and does have an enormous impact on turnover rates within the agencies. Studies have shown that annual turnover rates vary between 14% to 60% (Salloum et al., 2015). Consequences of turnover rates in child welfare can have severe costs for both the social worker and the agency. When a social worker decides to leave their position, their work must be re-distributed throughout the department (Boyas et al., 2015). Social workers who remain at the agency then take on additional cases, which put them at a heightened rate for burnout (Salloum et al., 2015). High turnover rates also impact the quality of services provided to children and families. For example, when a social worker decides to leave the child welfare agency, the child is given a new social worker. When disruption in services occurs, the chances of the child finding permanency has been shown to decrease (Salloum et al., 2015). Lastly, the employee

turnover rate can have a costly impact on the agency. On average, it costs approximately \$10,000 to recruit and train new employees (Boyas et al., 2015).

Studies have been conducted in order to determine who is at risk for experiencing secondary trauma and burnout within child welfare (Salloum et al., 2015; Sprang et al., 2011). Researchers have found that social workers in the middle stages of their career are more likely to experience secondary trauma and burnout due to their continuous exposure to traumatic events and workload (Salloum et al., 2015). In addition, social workers who have a personal history of experiencing personal trauma that are similar to those experienced by clients in the child welfare system, are at an even heightened risk of burnout (Sprang, Craig & Clark, 2011). Lastly, those who work with the most extreme cases, including those in Emergency Response, are particularly vulnerable to developing secondary trauma and burnout (Sprang et al., 2011). To lower these rates, there has been a universal consensus that it is imperative that social workers practice self-care (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Salloum et al., 2015; Smith, 2015).

Self-Care in Social Work

In order to manage stress and reduce secondary trauma and burnout, workers need to incorporate beneficial coping techniques (Arrington, 2008; Awa & Miller, 2010). Though self-care has been defined multiple ways, it is generally seen as how an individual engages in activities that positively contribute to their overall well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013; Salloum et al., 2015). There are many ways to practice self-care that can lead to constructive outcomes. Self-care serves to address the individual's social, psychological/emotional, physical, spiritual, leisure, and professional domains (Lee & Miller, 2013).

Self-care in a worker's personal life may include cooking, meditation, psychotherapy, and outdoor activities. (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Within the organization, social workers can also incorporate self-care in their professional lives. For instance, workers can make sure that they take scheduled breaks and lunches, set realistic goals when it comes to completing work, and resting when

needed (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). It also has been recommended that social workers seek support and guidance from their colleagues and supervisors to gain emotional support and feedback (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). When a social worker feels supported, it increases their overall well-being (Shier et al., 2012). Unfortunately, like the social workers themselves, their supervisors are also exposed to high levels of stress. In the child welfare setting, the role and responsibilities of the supervisor are enormous as they attempt to balance child welfare investigations and administrative requirements while monitoring their front-line works and units (McCrae, Scannapieco, & Overmann, 2015). In addition, the supervisors may lack the support they need to lower their stress levels such as minimal support from other supervisors and those in upper-level management (McCrae et al., 2015).

Self-care has several advantages in social work practice, which include the potential to reduce stress, increase the worker's competence and their overall well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013). In the long term, self-care can lower the risk of burnout, secondary stress, and turnover rate (Lee & Miller, 2013). Self-care allows those who are in the helping profession or plan to enter the social work field to attend to their own needs so they are able to effectively help others (Moore, Bledsoe, Perry, & Robinson, 2011). If an individual is unable to establish stability and balance within their personal life, it can impact the quality of services delivered to their clients (Bressi & Vaden, 2016). As a preventive measure for both long-term personal and professional well-being, self-care is an important tool that should be encouraged and developed early in a social work student's career in preparation of entering the social work field (Moore et al., 2011).

Stress in Graduate School

The life of a graduate student is not easy. In addition, the field of social work is highly challenging due to the demanding nature of the work in serving vulnerable populations. Like social workers in the field, social work students also experience stress, vicarious trauma, and emotional

exhaustion (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Social work students are often subjected to high levels of stress due to rigorous class work, late night studying and endless papers (Moore et al., 2011). While it is expected that social work students will gain beneficial skills within the classroom and their field placements, they may also be subjected to comparable stress in their placements that social workers experience due to the type clients that they work with in addition to their studies (Moore et al., 2011). Research has also found that graduate students develop stress in their efforts to juggle many different areas, including schoolwork, employment, hobbies, and attempts to incorporate time spent with family and friends (Moore et al., 2011). Unfortunately, students may not always have the opportunity, skills, sufficient time, or energy to manage their time and lower their stress levels (Moore et al., 2011). Due to the high amount of stress experienced by students, 10% of the student population suffers from illness including chronic diseases such as high blood pressure and heart disease (Moore et al., 2011). Thus, it is highly recommended that social work education should prepare their students to cope with challenges that current social workers face by including self-care training in their social work curriculum (Ying, 2009).

As stated earlier, self-care is an important and vital tool that should be encouraged and developed early in a graduate student's career in preparation to entering the social work field (Moore et al., 2011, Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Many students enter the field without proper preparation for working closely with vulnerable populations and the hardship that they may experience in their attempt to serve their clients (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Students who do not learn or practice self-care are at risk for secondary trauma, leading to possible burnout, which are currently negative outcomes faced by those who are in the field of social work (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014).

Studies have amplified the importance of practicing self-care during graduate school which can be incorporated in a variety of ways (Moore et al., 2011). For example, it is common to find students

sitting for long periods of time, whether studying at the library, sitting in class, or driving or riding public transportation to and from school (Moore et al., 2011). It is recommended that students incorporate physical exercise into their schedule in order to offset their long periods of inactivity (Moore et al., 2011). On an emotional level, students can journal and attend counseling where they have the space, opportunity and support to reflect on their thoughts and feelings (Moore et al., 2011). Additionally, students can participate in religious activities, including prayer and attending church to address their spiritual and religious needs (Moore et al., 2011). Studies have also found that social support has been linked to lowering stress and mental health problems by increasing an individual's overall well-being (Shannon, Simmeelink-McClearly, Im, Beacher & Crook-Lyon, 2014). Social support is the most commonly used form of self-care for those in social work (Yang, 2009). Moore and his colleagues (2011) reported that when students incorporate some form of self-care, they were better able to take an active role to fight against burnout and developing illness (Moore et al., 2011). In addition, students who have committed to incorporating self-care early in their academic careers, these practices have helped them maintain self-care habits throughout their career (Lee & Miller, 2013). Unfortunately, teaching the use of self-care is not required by social work curriculum. The reason behind this absence in the social work graduate curriculum continues to remain unknown, despite the encouragement for inclusion in classroom instruction by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Hence, many students enter the field with limited knowledge on the symptoms of compassion fatigue, burnout, and how self-care can be a preventive tool to avoid negative outcomes as listed earlier in the chapter (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014).

Empirical Research

Several researchers have studied the use of self-care by graduate students in the helping professions. Myers, Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Bordfeld, and Fingerhut (2012) studied the use of self-care with psychology graduate students by examining their self-care practices and their perceived stress. Participants completed a variety of surveys that documented their demographic, sleeping patterns, use of physical activities, perceived social support, use of strategies to manage their emotions, use of mindfulness practice, and their perceived stress. The study found that students who were not married, younger in age, and believed that their income was insufficient perceived themselves to have more stress. Students that perceived themselves to experience less stress were able to engage in more self-care practices, including better sleeping behaviors, stronger support system, increased ability to regulate emotions, and mindfulness acceptance. Myers et al. (2012) suggested that psychology graduate students should engage in education and training in self-care in order to learn how to manage their stress levels. Such activities can have a positive impact on their academic performance, the quality of services to clients, and lowering the students' risk of burnout once they enter the workforce. The researchers also suggested that further studies should be conducted in order to find how stress differs for students in other fields (Myers et al., 2012). Thus, researchers have studied the stress levels of graduate students and specifically those in social work and their use of self-care which is highly relevant to this study (Moore et al., 2011, Napoli & Bonifas, 2011).

Moore, Bledsoe, Perry, and Robinson (2011) were one of the studies that looked at the use of self-care among graduate social work students. The research required the social work students to keep a biweekly journal to discuss how they incorporated self-care into their lives throughout the semester. Students were asked to document the activity they engaged in, how the activities addressed an issue they were experiencing, and the impact that the particular activity had on either their mental, spiritual, emotional, social, or physical well-being. The researchers found that the students who engaged in

different types of self-care reported lower stress levels. With lowered stress levels, the students felt that they were able to increase their ability to focus on school and their clients. Some students even continued to journal after the study as their own form of self-care. Moore et al. (2011) stated that students should increase their awareness of contributing factors, including stress and lack of self-care practices that can lead to burnout. It was also recommended that the CSWE require students to engage in self-care as an-going practice.

Regarding the use of mindfulness within social work practice, Napoli and Bonifas (2011) conducted a quantitative study on social work graduate students who were enrolled in a 16-week Quality of Life course that incorporated mindfulness practice strategies and the development of self-care. In the classroom, students were required to engage in 10-minute breathing exercises, discussion on weekly learning exercises, and homework assignments that include journaling on their use of mindfulness, reading peer-reviewed articles, and presentations. The researchers utilized the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Questionnaire to see if there was an increase in four core areas: (1) acting with awareness, (2) accepting without judgment, (3) observing and (4) describing. Findings showed a significant positive increase of well-being in three out of the four areas: (1) health and functioning, (2) psychological and spiritual, and (3) social and economic while applying mindful practices including acting with awareness, accepting without judgment, and observing. This increase in mindfulness skills, for professional and personal use, can aid in increased self-care, thus reducing the risk of burnout and stress while increasing their empathy skills.

Gaps in the Literature

As previously stated, there is a dearth of research studies that examine the incorporation of self-care in particular with social work graduate students. The literature review does show that social work students rarely have the opportunity to learn about self-care during graduate school. However, when

given the opportunity, studies have found that students have been able to manage or reduce their stress levels and improving their own overall well-being learning useful coping skills, including journaling and mindfulness practice, which also can be used when experiencing stress in the field. Moreover, previous literature has not examined the different areas within the social work profession such as child welfare, though research indicates high rates of secondary trauma and burnout in this professional population.

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Though there has been limited research on the use of self-care in social work graduate students, many of these studies used a quantitative research method. This method has shown to be beneficial as it allows the researcher to collect data from a larger sample size. However, this method does not go in depth by exploring the graduate student's experience related to their stress or types of self-care practices they utilize to lower or manage their stress. In addition, past research has failed to study stress levels and self-care practices of social work students who plan on entering child welfare. The purpose of this research is to address this gap by exploring how graduate social work students who plan on working in child welfare use self-care during graduate school to lower or better manage their stress levels

Summary

The chapter explored the scope of the issue around self-care in the social work field, proposed the purpose of the study and research question, and providing an overview of the literature that examine the level of stress faced by social workers and graduate social work students. The theoretical framework for the study was presented utilizing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model, and the research methodology. This research aims to fill the gap in literature by conducting a qualitative study to explore the stress levels of four Fresno State MSW Title IV-E social work students and how they incorporate self-care, if at all. The following chapter will discuss the methodology used to collect this data.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The social work profession has been recognized as a highly demanding career, (Bressi & Vaden, 2016), specifically in regards to child welfare workers who are more likely to experience stress because of the nature of their job (Boyas et al., 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2013). Due to their level of stress in working with challenging clients or clients in difficult situations, child welfare workers are also at-risk for secondary trauma, which can lead to burnout (Salloum et al., 2015). In order to lower their stress levels and prevent secondary trauma and burnout, many social workers use self-care strategies to promote their overall well-being (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Salloum et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). Students who plan on entering the social work field ideally should be encouraged to prepare for the stress of the job by developing self-care practices (Moore et al., 2011, Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Though students may have the opportunity to learn self-care, it is currently not a requirement in most universities' social work curriculum (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). This study looked into the lives of four Fresno State Title IV-E MSW students and their use of self-care to manage or lower their stress levels.

Research Question

The main research question is: What is the experience of MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State in their experience of stress in graduate school? The related research question is: What role, if any, does self-care play in the lives of MSW Title IV-E graduate students in managing stress?

Research Design

This qualitative narrative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of Fresno State social work graduate students who are enrolled in the Title IV-E program. The study focused on their stress levels and how they were able to manage those stressors by their use of self-care, if at all.

The design of this research aims to capture the experiences of these students through story telling of their participation in the MSW program.

Methodology

Participants and Sampling

The target population for this study was full-time and part-time Fresno State social work graduate students who were enrolled in the Title IV-E program during the academic year 2016-2017. There were four participants used for this study, which were comprised of two female participants and two male participants. To recruit participants, an email was sent by the Title IV-E department to currently MSW students, which provided a description of the study, criteria for becoming a study participant, and contact contacted the researcher for additional information on the study and to set a date to meet (See Appendix A).

Research Instrument

The interview instrument was developed by the researcher, which was utilized to gather data through one-on-one interviews. The questionnaire contained a series of open-ended questions to better understand their experience as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student, which explored their stress, self-care practices, academic assignments or seminars dedicated to self-care, and benefits and limitations of incorporating self-care, if any (See Appendix B).

Data Collection

To collect the data, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with the four participants. Before the data collection began, the participants informed the researcher of the location where they will like the interview to take place. This allowed the participant to feel more comfortable when answering the questions in a setting of their choosing. Participants were then informed that their participation in the project is voluntary and with their permission, the interview will be audiotaped for transcription

purposes. Lastly, the participant signed the consent form, given a copy of the consent form, and provided a copy of the questions that will be asked during the interview. Once these steps were in place, the interviews took place.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, the researcher began the analyzing process by listening to each audio recording and transcribing the participants' answers fully. Once transcribing was complete, the data was analyzed using the computer software NVivo, which is a qualitative research software (QRS International, n.d.). The transcripts were imported into NVivo where the researcher read through each response. The participants' responses were then placed into themed categories, known as coding, these themes showed common experiences shared between each participants (QRS International, n.d.).

The audiotapes from the interviews were kept on a locked device in order to ensure confidentiality. In addition, when the audiotapes are transcribed, the participant's names were changed to preserve their anonymity. Lastly, the consent form advised the participant on the risks and benefits associated with being part of the study (See Appendix C).

Potential Benefits and Risks

One of the potential benefits in this study is that the data collected can provide the Department of Social Work Education at Fresno State a better understanding of the experiences and stressors that MSW Title IV-E students face while in graduate school. Also, it can inform the department on self-care strategies that students have used in order to decrease or manage their stress levels. In addition, the findings may influence the Fresno State Social Work Education Department to develop a seminar that educates students on self-care and its benefits. Lastly, participants in this study may also find that

discussing their experience and stress levels in regard to graduate school may be therapeutic and a form of self-care.

The participants in the study may face minimal risks when completing the interview. One risk that the participants may face is that when they discuss their stress, they may experience some type of discomfort. In addition, the students may also feel reluctant to share their experience as they may fear that the interview will be shared with California State University, Fresno, the Department of Social Worker Education, or the Title IV-E Department.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used to conduct this qualitative study. The chapter discussed the research design, the method that will be used to select participants and interview instrumentation, data collection procedures and data analysis. The information gathered in this study may give insight to the experiences of the Title IV-E MSW student and ways self-care is utilized to cope with those stressors, if at all. The following chapter will look at the results from the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected from the interviews with four MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State. The first section describes on the demographic characteristics of those who participated in the study. The second section examines four emerging themes derived from how the participants responded to the seven questions in the study regarding their stress and self-care practices.

Participants' Demographics

Four MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State participated in a one-on-one interview for the study. Of the four participants, two of the students were males and the other two were female. Two of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, one identified as Asian, and the fourth as Hispanic. Three out of the four participants stated they were between the ages of 24 to 34 years of age. The fourth participant was between the ages of 45 to 54. Two of the participants were full-time students and in their second year of the MSW program. One participant was a part-time student and also in their second year of the MSW program. The last participant was a full-time student in their first year of the MSW program.

Themes

The data collected from the interviews was organized by responses to the seven questions from the interview questionnaire. The seven questions were:

1. Please describe your experience as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student.
2. Please describe your experience with stress as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student.
3. Please tell me about any classroom assignments and/or Title IV-E seminars where you were encouraged and/or required to utilize self-care practices.
4. Please tell me what you do to incorporate self-care to manage stress, if any.

5. Please tell me the benefits in using self-care from your own experiences, if any.
6. Please tell me some of the difficulties or challenges you experienced in applying self-care, if any.
7. Are there any additional comments or questions you would like to share with me at this time?

The following section will present each question and related themes found within the participant's responses. The themes that emerged from this study were: (a) graduate school is stressful, (b) limited curriculum on self-care, (c) practicing self-care, and (d) challenges of self-care.

Graduate School is Stressful

The first theme that was found was regarding the participants experience while in graduate school. All of the students shared that they experienced some form of stress, which varied from participant to participant due to the amount of work that is required from the program. Participant A used a 1-10 rating scale to describe their level of stress. Though Participant A was aware of the amount of work required in graduate school from the Title IV-E BA program at Fresno State in which she was an undergraduate student, "From 1 to 10, I think it's a 9. But I already know that it was going to be stressful and it would take a lot of time from me."

Participant B stated that the majority of the graduate program was stressful due to the amount of work that was required: "I would say 80% of the program was stress. You're having to deal with school, assignments, classroom time, internship and research, all of this. Plus, you have so many deadlines you have to meet and you freak out."

As a part-time student, Participant D found that his stress was related to working full-time in a child welfare setting and managing school.

"It's a whole different type of stress. Unless you've been there, it's really hard to describe. And then also as a part-time student, sometimes it's even more stressful. Especially if you're trying to work in the county and you're supported, you're always meeting demands. Whether it's the

school demands or work demands. And it's just not easy. And, even full-time, I'm sure, working, trying to meet those demands. Just juggling, it's just really hard sometimes."

Participant C shared that they experienced stress, but believed it could have been worse since they are completing their first year in the program. However, they shared that stress played a large role in their personal life:

"But, it wasn't as bad as I expected. I hear a lot of horror stories. And those might come to fruition next semester, but, hopefully I can learn from this... My stress has been manageable, that I've gotten As and I haven't totally ruined my relationships. But you can see that it's making an impact."

In addition, three out of the participants expressed that their stress was also related to fulfilling the requirements of Title IV-E program. Participant A shared that when they were in the undergraduate Title IV-E program, it was known that it required a lot of work. Participant A specifically described stress as related to the learning agreement, which is a form that outlined required tasks to be completed at internship:

"I knew what it would take. It's a lot of work... And I think the learning agreement is very stressful yet you want to make sure you meet everything and that you're doing their learning agreement... You gotta really put in the work to get what you want to learn from it, from Title IV-E. I think the learning agreement, it broken down into three sections. Like, what are your professional values or what to do you want to learn from here. You sit down with them and then, what else? Multidimensional and psychosocial framework and how do you evaluate your practice. It's a lot. You have to be very serious about your learning agreement."

Participant B also shared that the master's program included lots of work in addition to attending seminars, which is an additional requirement from Title IV-E:

"...it's a lot of work, a lot of work. Like, I understand that it's a master's program but it's a lot of work... I would say it's not like the worst thing. But I would say, like, seminars would sometimes take too long. There was too much information crammed in like a 3-hour seminar. I felt like, you know, it would be cool to break things up a little bit."

Participant C described her graduate experience as time consuming and at times, draining:

"It's been pretty time consuming, I'd say, compared to other non-Title IV-E MSW students... Time consuming, exhausting. Like, I feel like when I get done with my internship, I'm just

draining, emotionally and physically and I just wanna like sit and do nothing for a while. And then after seminars, like on every other Friday or whatever, I just feel tired.”

Participants also shared how stress affected their personal lives, including making it more difficult to manage their schedules, emerging mental health concerns, and limiting their engagement in hobbies.

Participant A stated that her stress was derived from managing her many tasks. When stress was high, she experiences physical discomfort:

“Especially with balancing class, internship, meetings. In the morning, I’m very tired. You sit there and think about homework, doing homework, and the information is very valuable. I do listen and try to take it in... When it’s crunch time, that’s when I feel stressed and my body aches.”

Participant B shared some mental health discomfort experienced which was caused by the level of stress and workload, which continued to negatively impact them when school was out of session:

“I’ve had so many freak outs. I’ve has so many breakdowns. Like, mental breakdowns just because of how much is put on your plate. Like, it’s a lot. I know I’ve has people tell me that the workload prepares you for your career. I can’t imagine it being that much of a plate load. I felt every day I was like stressed out about something. Like, it was either my personal life, school, getting something done on time.”

Participant B then explained in further detail of a difficult moment when their stress levels were high and their inability to lower it, even when they were on break from school:

“I know Christmas break, after the 3rd semester, that first week of Christmas break, I woke up every morning and I freaked out. I had major anxiety because I, like, my brain was telling me ‘you have something to do. You need to do something. You need to do something with school. Something it due today.’ And I was on break. I was done with all my assignment, and like here I was waking up in a panic. That’s how bad the stress was. I literally had trauma.”

For Participant C, their inability to engage in hobbies negatively affected their relationships with others, including their significant other and family members. Participant C also reported that stress may have impacted their relationship with their peers:

“I didn’t engage in any of my hobbies last semester, my first semester or grad school. And it kinda added to my stress level, a lot and I ended up taking it out of my boyfriend more

than I should of. I shouldn't have done it at all. I felt terrible. But we fought a lot and that compounded my stress even more... having that relationship difficulty. Even with my peers, like... I feel like we would get kinda snidey with each other at times. I don't know if its competition or stress or what is going on, but we were friends in undergrad, like... what the shit happened? And then also, familial, I don't see my family and that puts further stress on me and them.”

Like Participant C, Participant D shared that they were unable to engage in activities they enjoyed due to their stress levels and the amount of work that needed to be completed:

“I don't think I looked at a textbook, at anything, like a novel or watch T.V. for 2 weeks because I was just like this. Then I had to go to work and, just because of the stress levels, it was so intense. You know... because I was working and trying to work that out, it was really hard at times.”

Limited Curriculum on Self-Care

A second theme that was found was in relation to limited curriculum and Title IV-E seminars that inspired or encouraged the participants to engage in self-care practices. All four participants reported difficulty in recalling class room assignments that focused on self-care.

Participant A shared her group lab experience, stating that she engaged in an activity that reduced their stress: “I think the only time that self-care practice really happened was probably in social work 225 in our group lab. The presenter did their topic on, what was it... stress care and stress management. So we did a visual meditation in class. That was helpful.”

Participant B also described his group lab experience, sharing that they discussed the use of self-care, but could not recall other class assignments that required them to incorporate it.

“I can't really remember any classroom assignments that dealt with self-care. We were never asked to write about what we do for self-care. I don't even think we ever talked about what we were supposed to do for self-care. I know, like, in 225, in groups, we would have stress groups and that was the only time we ever talked about, like, utilizing self-care. Our groups would talk about ways we can use self-care, but that was it. And that was like an hour every week. But, I don't remember any classes or classroom assignments that, like, encouraged us to utilize self-care.”

Participant C reported that they discussed self-care in their qualitative class. However, this was the only time it was incorporated into the classroom.

“No assignments come to mind, at all. I guess during once qualitative assignment, we talked about self-care and then we reflected on it. In that sense, I wanted to incorporate it more. But nothing direct, at all... I think we definitely need more direct instruction on self-care. Because I know we are always told about the benefits but not really in depth. And it’s really essential. We know it is, but we don’t do it and I think it’s so silly.”

Participant D shared that a social work professor discussed the use of self-care with their students, but was the only time it was discussed within the classroom.

“That’s a tough one. I don’t think I’ve ever had any. I think, you know, I’m trying to remember if there were any self-care practices. You know, I think there was a textbook I had that talked about that. But other than that, I think one professor actually, Barrera, he actually asked us what do we use to do self-care. But that’s about it. I don’t remember any time.”

In terms of Title IV-E seminars, all of the participants reported that no seminar was dedicated to discussing self-care. For example, Participant A stated they were not aware of any seminars and shared that they would even like self-care practices to be included during the seminars:

“I don’t really recall a Title IV-E seminar doing any type of self-care so, that’s kinda interesting when you think about that. It would be nice if Title IV-E would do a little, before we start our day, do a little stretch or breathing technique. Check in with us. Yeah they check in with us, “How is everyone doing? I know you made it through the first semester, the second semester you’re almost there.” Maybe encouraging or maybe doing some self-care technique. Or maybe even having a topic on that so you don’t feel burnt out. Like, what is burnt out?”

Participant B stated that self-care was discussed shortly at the end of the seminars, often when students were ready to leave:

“And Title IV-E, none of our seminars covered self-care. Umm, I know like, towards the end of every seminar, Dr. Whittle or someone would always say, “Ok, like go make sure you’re utilizing self-care” but it was like a little memo, we weren’t ever really taught anything or like, there was never an emphasis on it. It was kind of just like, “Hey, remember self-care.” Most of us were jamming out the door so get out, so I don’t know if all of us heard it. I don’t think there was a lot of, like, I never really got that. I don’t know if I just missed it or wasn’t paying attention.”

Participant C also reported that they were reminded to engage in self-care, “Title IV-E seminar, definitely nothing comes to mind. I mean, everyone hints upon it. Like, “Hey make sure you guys do self-care.” But nothing structured and nothing really reinforced.”

Participant D shared a similar view that self-care may have been discussed with another seminar topic: “As far as seminars, I think they have had some on self-care, like compassion fatigue. I think that’s about it. They haven’t really had about self-care.”

Practicing Self-Care

The third theme founds looked at the self-care practices of the participants. All four participants described unique ways they engaged in self-care. Participant A shared that she enjoyed spending time with her daughter and family members:

“...Just mommy and daughter time. Whether it’s going to church... she knows it’s church time. Going to the park. Umm, feeding ducks... I try to make an effort to see my grandma, my mom, my sister, especially during my winter break... So just being able to spend time with family so my daughter can be around my family so she knows she has family members.”

For personal time, Participant A also likes to have time for herself.

“Personally for me, if I need a little bath, I’ll take a bubble bath, put some candles, get a glass of wine... Workout when I have time. Eat healthy. So I went out shopping, even though I don’t buy something, it’s just me walking around, having a cup of coffee. Umm, trying things on. So that makes me happy. I don’t know, it’s just me. I don’t mind the company by myself. I’m not really needy and I don’t need my boyfriend every time, I’m just me. Yeah. So, just finding the time for me is peaceful.”

Participant B incorporated self-care by seeing his friends and engaging in activities that were not related to school which included counseling:

“I always incorporate self-care by not doing anything really school related and kind of just like go grab coffee with like a friend or close friend of mine that I haven’t seen in a while. Cause, being a graduate student, school consumes your life... I’d always just catch up with my mentors or people that have mentored me in the past so I would just talk to them about stuff. Umm... just relieve stress and just, like, talk to someone. I always have so much stress on my mind and I would vent to get everything off my chest. And also, I like, I would always go to counseling so I would go, maybe like, 3 times a month. Umm... I love counseling, I love therapy... Just,

like, talking about all that stuff and talking about dealing with my mental health, the master's program, it was super helpful.”

Participant C enjoyed being around friends and family as well as engaging in activities that promoted their physical health:

“Usually after every seminar, from 4E, a few friends and I will get a few beers near Maya. We talk about how the seminar went. Last semester, a couple of my friends, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, Hmong, Hispanic, me White but also Armenia, we have a little ethnic pot luck, just for fun between us, which was nice. And we talked about our backgrounds. With family, I try to go see my dad play music over at Full circle brewery... And then the rock climbing... I made it a point to at least go outdoors, climbing, once a month next semester. Hopefully. Oh eating healthy! I feel like it makes a huge difference. I quit smoking too.”

Lastly, Participant D described the way they incorporated self-care into their life. They too enjoyed spending time with their family and also spent time with their pet and incorporating forms of therapy to manage their thinking that was caused by stress related to school:

“I've been seeing my child. Like for Christmas, I had her for Christmas time, so now she's back up in school, she lives in Sacramento. Doing that was kinda fun. Oh, another thing I do have is, I have a dog...it likes to chase, like balls and toys. In my apartment complex, I have a mini park and so we can... another thing too that I've used is CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy...Its helped big time. Because, before I could get, really, you know your mind will start wondering and you start doing the illogical thinking. Like, if you get a bad grade on a paper, you think, oh my gosh I'm a failure or that you'll flunk out of college. Because in graduate school, you need a B average, or higher, you know. I learned to say that things will work out. So I don't metastasize everything.”

Due to engaging in these self-care practices, all the participants shared that they gained some type of benefit. Participant A simply shared that it was overall beneficial for them especially when managing stress levels: “So it helps me manage my stress levels. Like I have a balance, I don't feel overwhelmed with just school, school, school and that's all I see. It's good, it's healthy for you. Umm, it's very positive, gives you energy. And, just being at peace.”

Participant B also experienced the benefits of incorporating self-care as it allowed them to take a break from being an MSW student to spend time with important people in their lives, specifically their friends:

“So for me, like, a benefit of using self-care is just like I was able to see the people that really matter to me. Like, friends that I never got to see anymore. It was hard getting texts from people saying, "Hey, I haven't seen you in forever. What are you doing?" You know? So, I think a benefit was just, like, using self-care to make time for them and catching up and, like, being able to be around people that really bring joy to my life. That's a huge benefit in using my self-care... I say a benefit is just being able to step away from the grad program and being able to see people. That really helped me.”

Participant C described several benefits that self-care has had on their lives, especially regarding their mental health:

“But I think it makes a difference. I feel like I take out my frustrations less on people around me. I really do feel a difference. Like, if I go rock climbing pissed off, I leave in a better mood... Better mental health, feel less depressed and like anxious, I would say. And I think I've been better at separating my internship experiences from my personal life, not talking it home with me. Now I just need to apply that to my education and not take my stress from school back. It actually helps create more structure too. So I'm less chaotic with my life because I need to make it a point to insert these self-care strategies and now I'm like, better at managing other things as well... Overall, improvement socially, emotionally, physically, and educationally. Like, my grades have been improving I would say.”

Participant D had a different experience when incorporating self-care, sharing that it was infrequently but still found self-care has some benefits: “By the time I did it, it was too late, the damage has been done. But at the same time, I think, the benefit is that at least you have it out and then you can work on it because if you keep it in, it just gets worse. It can blow up into your face.”

Challenges of Self-Care

The last theme looks at the challenges and difficulties implementing self-care. Three out of the four participants shared that time management was their largest issue.

Participant B stated that they were limited in their involvement with self-care because of class assignments that were due: “I would say just time. That was the biggest challenge. You didn't really have time to apply self-care I felt. Umm... I stated earlier, like, there is always something due, there is always something that needed to be worked on.”

Participant C also stated that time was their biggest challenge, especially with other activities that were required of them, such as attending class, going to internship, seminars, and completing assignments:

“Time management has been an issue. I mean, I don't even know how many hours I've put into school, but class from 8-5, then internship from 8-5 or 6 depending on where you're placed, that leaves you Friday, maybe, because we have those seminars too. So just, time and time management, has made it super difficult to do anything. Like, the amount of homework. Leaves us one day, maybe I need to find more forms of self-care, like, even just sitting and meditating. But, I feel like there is not enough time in the day to do it.”

In addition, Participant C shared that waiting until the last minute to complete assignments made it difficult to incorporate self-care especially when multiple assignments were due:

“One of the things you notice in self-care in managing your time. Sometimes we procrastinate, you know... were human. But we think we can do things at the last minute. I don't know what it is but, as humans, like to do that sometimes... The hard thing is though, is when you're in, like the last semester, you don't know where to start sometimes. Because you're told to do this, told to do the thesis/project by a certain time, and you're pulled 20 different directions. Then you have to do things at internship or field placement.”

Research Question

Through the collection of information from MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State, the following research questions were addressed: What is the experience of MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State in their experience of stress in graduate school? The related research question was: What role, if any, does self-care play in the lives of MSW Title IV-E graduate students in managing stress?

The participants expressed that their overall experience as a MSW Title IV-E student was stressful due to the amount of work required in the program, including internship, the learning agreement, attending Title IV-E seminars, assignments, attending class, and researching for their thesis/project. Due to the amount of work, the participants had difficulty managing their time which resulted in some of the participants suffering from mental health concerns and limiting their ability to engage in self-care.

Self-care played an important role in the participants' lives, especially when lowering or managing their stress. Participants engaged in various self-care activities, including spending time with family and friends, attending church, eating healthy, staying active, and attending therapy. The benefits for incorporating self-care was also prevalent as participants shared that self-care practices helped manage their stress levels, giving them the opportunity to see important people in their lives, and improved their overall mood. However, there were limited opportunities for students to engage or participant in self-care through classroom assignments and no known seminars provided by the Title IV-E department that discussed self-care.

Summary

The responses from the interviews with four MSW Title IV-E students were presented regarding their experiences of stress and the use of self-care. The findings of this study suggest that Title IV-E MSW students have experienced a number of challenges to practicing self-care during graduate school. The participants shared that they experienced a high level of stress due to managing assignments and attending internship. However, they also disclosed how they managed their stress with the use of self-care. The next chapter will include a discussion of the findings and conclude with recommendations and implication for social work and future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the findings of this study and its relevance to current literature regarding stress and self-care of MSW Title IV-E students. Furthermore, a review of the implications for social work practice will be addressed. Lastly, strengths and limitations of this research will be examined and recommended for future research will be suggested.

Discussion of Findings

This qualitative study was conducted to better understand the stress levels and self-care practices of MSW Title IV-E students who attend Fresno State. The information gathered for the study was used to answer the research question: What is the experience of MSW Title IV-E students at Fresno State in their experience of stress in graduate school? The related research question was: What role, if any, does self-care play in the lives of MSW Title IV-E graduate students in managing stress?

The four themes that emerged from the study were: (a) graduate school is stressful, (b) limited curriculum on self-care, (c) practicing self-care, and (d) challenges of self-care.

Graduate School is Stressful

Previous literature has found that graduate students experience high levels of stress. Moore et al. (2011) stated that graduate students are stressed due to the amount of course that is required, including attending class, field placement, and completing assignments. All four participants in this study shared that they experienced high levels of stress due to the amount of work required, including assignments, completing the learning agreement, and attending Title IV-E seminars. They also discussed how stress impacted their lives, including making it difficult to manage their schedules, emerging mental health concerns, and limited engagement in self-care hobbies.

Limited Curriculum on Self-Care

Due to the amount of work that students are expected to complete, they may not have the opportunity to practice self-care (Moore et al., 2011). Unfortunately, educating and engaging students in self-care is not mandated to be part of the social work graduate curriculum, though it is encouraged by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Participants in this study expressed that it was difficult to engage in self-care due to time management. Two of the participants shared they were able to discuss self-care in their Social Work 225: Advanced Group Practice. However, they had difficulty identifying classroom assignments and/or Title IV-E seminars where they were encouraged and/or required to utilize self-care.

Practicing Self-Care

Prior research studied the use of self-care among graduate students and the impact that self-care had on their lives. Myers et al. (2012) found that when psychology graduate students engaged in education and training in self-care, it positively impacted their lives, including improving their academic work and the quality of services they provide to their clients. In addition, these students were able to lower their risk of burnout once they entered into the workforce. Moore et al. (2011) required graduate social work students to create a biweekly journal that documented self-care activities they were involved in and the impact it had on their lives. The researchers found that the students who were able to engage in self-care practices were able to lower their stress levels. This, in turn, improved their ability to focus in school and with their clients, in which results are similar to the students in the previously discussed study. Moore et al. (2011) also stated that students should become aware of the factors that contribute to burnout, including the ability to incorporate self-care to manage their stress. Napoli and Bonifas (2011) also conducted a study with social work graduate students who were enrolled in a Quality of Life course that used mindfulness and self-care practices. When the students engaged in breathing exercises, completed homework and discussions surrounding mindfulness. This exercise was shown to improve the

student's overall health and functioning, psychological and spiritual, and social and economic which can help the students' use of self-care. When the participants of this study engaged in hobbies or other self-care practices, they were able to gain some positive benefit, including stress management and improved mental health, similar to the finding in the research conducted by Myers et al. (2012), Moore et al. (2011), and Napoli and Bonifas (2011).

Challenges of Self-Care

Lastly, previous research also found that graduate students incorporating of self-care into their lives is challenging, due to not having sufficient time or the skills to do so (Moore et al., 2011). Three out of the four participants in this study stated that one of the challenges they faced in incorporating self-care was due to time constraints. The participants added that internship, seminars, homework, and researching for their projects/thesis made it difficult to engage in self-care.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Given the research on self-care with graduate social work students, it is important that social work departments at the university level teach and encourage students to develop the practice of stress relief through the use of self-care. Like their professional counterparts, social work students cannot provide adequate services to others if they do not take an active role in reducing their own stress. One way this can be achieved is by teaching student's mindfulness practices. In social work, mindfulness is defined as acknowledging and understanding what clients are experiencing (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). This awareness allows students to work closely with clients without judgment and understand the perspective of their clients while developing empathic skills. The downside of mindfulness is that it may put the student at risk for developing secondary trauma through exposure to the client's traumatic events. In order to address this concern, students can use mindfulness to protect themselves through accepting their clients' experiences without personal judgment and incorporate empathy to their own situation.

Furthermore, mindfulness has been shown to increase resiliency and openness in creating positive change in their own life. Mindfulness can be utilized in the classroom and curriculum to lower the risk of negative outcomes including burnout before the student graduates (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011).

Educators can prepare graduate social work students for entering the field by incorporating material on the use of professional self-care in social work courses and seminars. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. First, professors can teach students to be aware of the warning signs of compassion fatigue and burnout, which can aid in lowering their risk of developing these outcomes. Discussion regarding their experiences with their clients during their internships can also be used to this end. Professors can create and advocate for assignments that document the student's use of self-care and some of the benefits they receive through the use of journaling, a concept used by Moore et. Al (2011). Also, professors can incorporate self-care into the classroom through the use of breathing and relaxation exercises.

In addition, the Title IV-E program in the social work department can educate MSW Title IV-E students to create a seminar dedicated to teaching students about self-care. As students begin the MSW program, a seminar could be conducted that teaches them about the risk of developing secondary trauma and burnout and the benefits in lowering these effects by practicing self-care. Students can then create individual self-care plans which identifies self-care practices that they can use in their day-to-day lives and when they face a crisis can be utilized. Students can then begin incorporating self-care practices while in graduate school in order to prepare for the field upon graduation. These strategies can support the students' transition into their profession by equipping them with beneficial tools to manage stress and thus, become better prepared to serve their clients.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study contains several strengths. This study offers an in-depth view of the lived experiences of MSW Title IV-E students. Their insights can provide Fresno State's Department of Social Work Education with an understanding of the factors that contribute to their stress as social work graduate students. In addition, having the students share their insights regarding their experience of being an MSW Title IV-E has given them a voice, an option rarely available to them.

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is that the study focused solely on the stress levels and self-care practices of MSW Title IV-E students. This meant that the study excluded the experiences of the Title IV-E bachelor level students who plan on entering child welfare upon graduation. Secondly, quantitative data were not gathered for this study. Quantitative data, including surveys, may have revealed different outcomes of the stress levels and use of self-care of the MSW Title IV-E Fresno State student population. Lastly, another limitation involved the research and data collection. In the e-mails to the participants, it stated that the research was focusing on the second-year social work student. There was a high probability that the participants had developed a relationship with the researcher through shared classes or Title IV-E seminars, reflecting researcher bias. In addition, this relationship may have influenced the way the participants responded to the interview during the data collection stage of the study.

Direction for Future Research

Future research can focus on several areas related to this study. First, future studies can be conducted to examine the stress levels and self-care practices of masters and bachelor's level Title IV-E students. In addition, it would also be beneficial to see how MSW students in the other programs in the social work department such as Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) manage their stress and if those programs educate the students on the importance of incorporating self-care practices. Lastly, future research could survey the students' stress level and the ways they relieve their stress through the use of

self-care. This research approach would give a larger number of students the opportunity to share their experiences in regards to their self-care practices.

Summary

This chapter presented a brief discussion of the research study's findings and its relevance to existing literature. Implications for social work practice including teaching students about self-care was considered. The study's strengths and limitations of the study were both outlined. Though the research provided insight into the lived experiences of MSW Title IV-E students, by the nature of the study's design, it excluded the experiences of BA Title IV-E students. Due to relationships the researcher developed with the participants prior to the study, their responses may have been shaped by their relationship to the researcher. Though this study was qualitative in nature, quantitative data were not included which may yield different results. The chapter concluded with recommendations for future research including broadening the scope of this research to MSW students in other programs as well as to BA Title IV-E students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATION EMAIL

PARTICIPATION EMAIL

Your Voice Is Important!

You're invited to participate in a study about your experience as a MSW Title IV-E student, specifically regarding stress levels and use of self-care. A one-on-one interview will be conducted and I am currently looking for four participants.

To be part of this study, you must be a current MSW student at Fresno State. In addition, you also must be in the Title IV-E program. Participants can be part-time or full-time students. However, I am looking for two male and two female participants.

The interview will last approximately one hour and your feedback can educate future MSW Title IV-E students on how to manage stress.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at Vanessacregar@mail.fresnostate.edu or (559) 681-6964.

Thank you for your time and participation!

Vanessa Cregar, Second-Year Graduate Social Work Student

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The instrumentation will be utilized to gather data during one-on-one interviews with the participants.

The following questions will be asked:

Age: What is your age

- 24-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64

Gender: Female Male

What Ethnicity or Race do you identify with:

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other: _____

1. Please describe your experience as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student.
2. Please describe your experience with stress as a Fresno State Title IV-E MSW student.
3. Please tell me about any classroom assignments and/or Title IV-E seminars where you were encouraged and/or required to utilize self-care practices.

4. Please tell me what you do to incorporate self-care to manage stress, if any.
 - a. Probe: Please tell me specifically what types of self-care you have used.
 - b. Probe: If you have used self-care practices, please share with me how these practices affected your level of stress.
5. Please tell me the benefits in using self-care from your own experiences, if any.
6. Please tell me some of the difficulties or challenges you experienced in applying self-care, if any.
7. Are there any additional comments or questions you would like to share with me at this time?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Vanessa Cregar. The purpose of this study is to learn about your experience as a Title IV-E MSW student in regards to stress and self-care. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are currently enrolled in the MSW program at Fresno State, involved in the Title IV-E program, and responded to the email requesting your participation.

This research study is designed to examine the experience of MSW Title IV-E Fresno State students using open-ended questions constructed by the researcher. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The interview will be based on a one-time basis and last approximately one hour. The interview will be tape-recorded. At any time, if you may experience discomfort discussing your experience, you can choose not to participate in the study and the interview will end. We cannot guarantee that you will receive any benefits from this study. However, you will also be contributing to awareness and education of the experiences of being a MSW Title IV-E student. You may also find that the interview can also be therapeutic as it allows you to express your thoughts and opinions in a safe place.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Tape recordings and notes will be kept in a non-disclosed location in a locked cabinet that only the researcher will have access to. When the study is complete, the recording along with any notes will be destroyed.

There are minimal risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study.

Potential risks or discomforts include possible emotional feelings when asked questions during the interview. If you should experience discomfort, the interview can be stopped. In addition, you may also be provided with information regarding counseling services located at Fresno State.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with California State University, Fresno and the Department of Social Work Education. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. The Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects at California State University, Fresno has reviewed and approved the present research.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have any additional questions regarding the study, you may contact the study's chair, Dr. Delich at (559) 472-99717. Questions regarding the rights of research subjects may be directed to Kris Clarke, Chair, CSU Fresno Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects at (559) 278-4468.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE, HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

Signature of Subject and Date

Subject name