

Reflection

COVID-19: Social work reflections on challenges and lessons

Betty C. Tonui¹, Kristen E. Ravi² and Patricia C. Rodriguez³

¹ Department of Anthropology, Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA

² College of Social Work, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Knoxville, TN, USA

³ The Bail Project, Marina del Rey, CA, USA

Received 28 October 2020

Accepted for publication 3 December 2020

Published 18 December 2020

1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a pandemic that has changed our lives drastically. In this reflection, we focus on the disruptions and lessons from our lived experiences hoping that our shared vulnerability and collective experience calls us to reflect more and show compassion within ourselves, places of work, and our homes. In the following sections, we highlight the perspectives of a social work field liaison, a social work Ph.D. candidate and a mother, as well as a practicing community liaison social worker.

2. Social work field liaison

The COVID-19 has resulted in significant disruptions as social distancing policies were established. I [BT] begin this reflection by sharing my experiences as a field liaison. For context, I wrote this reflection after the spring semester of 2020 ended. As a liaison and an instructor of records, some of my responsibilities included linking students, their field instructors, and the university. Since this was through an online platform, my support was provided primarily through emails, announcements, or phone calls, where necessary. Inevitably, the pandemic had significant disruptions on social work field students. In early March 2020, many of my students started working remotely, while others reported losing placements. As a result, I witnessed my students go through a period filled with anxious thoughts, feelings of isolation, and confusion. In response to COVID-19, however, the Council of Social Work Education, the social work accrediting body in the United States, allowed students to obtain fewer hours in the spring semester, unlike common practice. Such changes

enabled many of my students to complete their field hours successfully. Even though some could not continue in-person, the school developed new structures to include assigning students to work with faculty members to meet their practice goals. While this process looked different than anticipated for the student, these opportunities offered a different perspective in integrating research activities into field learning experiences.

Despite the pandemic, there have been significant takeaways from this season. As a field liaison, I learned that *flexibility*, *empathy*, and *compassion* were of paramount importance during these unprecedented times. These values are not new for social workers. These are values that we naturally draw on while working with diverse groups of people and a variety of complex needs.

I also found that having a routine during this season has been helpful yet unpredictable. Having a clear routine, especially when working from home, has helped manage my stress during the uncertainty. Indeed, evidence suggests that individuals who have set habits and routines live healthier lifestyles, while those who have no routine are more likely to experience higher levels of stress, lack of sleep, poor diet, and poor use of time (Northwestern Medicine, 2020). Further, World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) indicates that positive lifestyle behaviors such as having a good self-care routine improve one's mental health and well-being; thus, this was important to me. Consequently, the pandemic creates stress and anxiety for us all, but I have found that a daily routine has helped me reduce some of these stressors.

Assuming a role as a field liaison also provided me with an opportunity to acknowledge and support my students'

feelings while offering encouragement. I responded to emails more frequently as needed to ease students' anxieties, created more discussions for students to check-in, and posted more announcements so that students were aware of their expectations. These actions not only showed compassion but also created a space where students felt cared for and informed. Even as challenging as this may have been for the students, I noticed greater resilience and flexibility in the students' willingness to adapt and adjust as needed.

3. Community liaison social worker

In this section, I [PR] elaborate on my experiences as a social work community liaison. My role consists of supporting clients who are immigrants, both documented and undocumented, with a wide range of needs. As a community liaison, it is my responsibility to ensure that all have access to the necessary support. I have had to collaborate with different agencies to help my clients navigate available resources. During the early stages of the pandemic, I managed an overwhelming number of cases that arose during the pandemic. As a result of overseeing many caseloads, I experienced burnout, both mentally and physically. To meet my clients' unique needs, I spent many hours reaching out to different individuals who could address the emotional, economic, and safety needs of the population I support.

Many of my clients are immigrants who do not qualify for unemployment or other public benefits due to their immigration status. These clients hesitate to accept formal assistance due to concerns about losing eligible immigration status. Given how stringent the policies are, I felt frustrated. While I am well versed in resources and have worked with this population for some time, formal resources are not always available. The majority of the readily available resources came from my personal network. These social networks include individuals who may work for law offices or engage in advocacy for immigrants, or have a small business. Still, on the side, they are working to help undocumented immigrants to keep their lights on, have food, ensuring clients are not experiencing wage theft or being abused by landlords. Responding to these needs was extraordinarily exhausting and emotionally draining.

Furthermore, I have learned that it is essential to remind myself that I cannot do everything 'in one day'. During the pandemic, I forced myself to focus more on empowering my clients to seek the available resources independently, but I played an active role in making referrals as needed. Empowering clients, indeed, is one of the core values of the social work profession. I have had to remind myself that my goals as a social worker are to help my clients develop their

ability to change their situation and prevent it from reoccurring (Hossen, 2005). One way I was able to empower my clients was by assisting them to understand their social issues and refer them out for formal or informal resources.

It was vital for me to remind myself that all my clients' feelings and fears are valid during this season, especially as more evidence suggests numerous emotional threats associated with COVID-19 and the lockdowns (Fegert et al., 2020). For example, some of my clients had a range of needs and concerns related to safety. I struggled to validate some of my clients' feelings that I perceived as more privileged than others, in more dire situations. It was challenging for me to be empathic, given these diverse situations.

4. Ph.D candidate and a mother

Before COVID-19, I [KR] had approval from the institutional review board (IRB) to conduct qualitative research through two focus groups at domestic violence shelters. As social distancing guidelines were released, I changed my research methods to include ten individual phone interviews and verbal quantitative surveys. Conducting phone interviews proved to be slightly more disruptive than a scheduled focus group due to the need to shift my focus away from my current work to conduct interviews when participants would call. The first few interviews were the most difficult since I shared a home office and needed to move rooms to interview to maintain participant confidentiality. At first, I felt flustered and disorganized. I realized that I needed to be more organized. I created a separate interview space with multiple copies of the interview consent form, interview protocol, and a recording device. Additionally, when participants would call, I would ask them if I could call them back in five minutes, during which I would re-focus myself and prepare for the interview.

As with any challenging situation, I have learned from it and have experienced a change in perspective. Since I was conducting research during the pandemic and not having consistent childcare myself, I felt connected to my research participants who had the same difficulties. Moreover, the pandemic has helped me adjust the expectations that I have for myself and how I measure productivity. I have started setting small, realistic, daily goals for what I want to accomplish.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we hope that our three perspectives can offer insight into seeing the significant influences that the Coronavirus has across different areas of our lives. We also hope this reflection conveys a sense of resilience amid the pandemic, flexibility, and acknowledgment of feelings. While

we may face and encounter diverse experiences along the way, we hope to explore our unique styles in managing stress and be flexible while being innovative in executing our tasks. Lastly, we hope that this reflection highlights our shared vulnerability. Perhaps we can look at these moments as a collective experience that calls us to reflect more and offer compassion in our workplaces and homes.

References

- Fegert, J.M., Vitiello, B., Plener, P.L. and Clemens, V. (2020) 'Challenges and burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic for child and adolescent mental health: a narrative review to highlight clinical and research needs in the acute phase and the long return to normality', *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 14(20), pp. 1-11. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00329-3>
- Hossen, M.A. (2005) 'Empowerment-Based Social Work Practice', *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 66(2), pp. 196-211.
- Northwestern Medicine (2020) *Health Benefits of Having a Routine*. Available at: <https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/health-benefits-of-having-a-routine#:~:text=Routines%20Can%20Be%20Fun&text=Some%20ways%20a%20routine%20can,negatively%20impact%20your%20overall%20health> (Accessed: 30 June 2020).
- World Health Organization (2020) *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*. Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2 (Accessed: 30 June 2020).