

***MSW Student Perspectives on
their Mental Health Conditions:
Career Motivation and Future
Practice Implications***

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Objectives

- Recognize the frequency of MSW students' self-experienced mental health issues, and related motivation to pursue a social work career.
- Understand how self-experienced mental health issues can impact MSW students' perceptions of direct practice work with clients.
- Describe recommendations for MSW programs and faculty to support and mentor students with self-experienced mental health issues.



Background: Mental Health Prevalence

- 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness (NIMH, 2023)
 - Highest rates: Ages 18-25 (~34%) & 26-49 (28%)
- Graduate students show significant anxiety (26%) and depression (16%) (Chirikov et al., 2020)
- MSW students - largest prop., female (~81%), 22-24 y/o (19.6%), 25-29 y/o (29.9%) (CSWE, 2025)



Social Work Context

- Social workers = largest mental health workforce (NASW, 2021)
- Students often drawn by lived experience
- Rise in clinical practice interest



Literature Gap

- Limited research on MSW student mental health
- 6,112 social workers 40.2% reported a history of mental health issues, 10% reported substance use issues (Straussner et al., 2018)
- Limited research indicating SEMHI = career motivator (Biggerstaff, 2000; Rompf & Royse, 1994; Sellers & Hunter, 2005)
- Further need to examine SEMHI + career motivation phenomenon



Theoretical Framework

- Wounded Healer (Jung, 1961)
- Psychic Pain → motivation to help others
- Rooted in lived experience & meaning-making (Gilroy, et al., 2001)



Wounded Healer in Practice

- Benefits: empathy, insight, resilience, trust in therapeutic process, enhanced skills, resilience (Gilroy, et al. 2001,;Newcomb et al.,2015)
- Risks: burnout, poorly managed countertransference, boundary violations, professional impairment, overidentification (Zerubavel and Wright, 2012)
- Dual nature of lived experience



Study Purpose

- Examine Self Experienced Mental Health Issue(s) (SEMHI) prevalence
- Impact on career choice
- Perceived effects on clinical work



Methods

- Cross-sectional survey, 11 close ended questions
- N = 188 MSW students
- Online data collection over 2 years
- SAS 9.4
- Descriptive statistics, Fisher exact test (demographic variable x student perception)
- Response rate: 2019* 45%



Sample Characteristics

- 84.5% female
- 90% clinical concentration
- 70% full-time



Key Findings: Prevalence

- 48% of all students reported SEMHI
 - 88% of these of were from clinical concentration
- Most common: anxiety (~29%), depression (~20%), trauma related dx. (~12%)
- Higher than general population



Key Findings: Career Choice

- 82%: SEMHI influenced career choice
- Higher in clinical students (85%)
- Macro students (60%)
- Suggests SEMHI motivational role



Key Findings: Clinical Impact (Positive)

- Among clinical students
 - ~99%: increased empathy for clients
 - ~99%: stronger helping capacity
- Supports wounded healer concept



Key Findings: Clinical Risks

- 63%: potential negative impact
- Risks: burnout, countertransference, boundary confusion, low self confidence, over identification
- Not all students recognize risks



Limitations

- Single institution sample
- Homogenous of sample (race and ethnicity, female - PWI)
- Binary survey questions



SEMHI Implications for Education

- Need explicit curriculum integration to normalize
- Address potential impact on clinical practice
- Focus on self-awareness & use of self
- Teach boundaries, supervision, countertransference, self-care



Ethical & Pedagogical Tensions

- Gatekeeping & student support
- NASW Code of Ethics on impairment (Standard 4.05)
- Lack of clear policies procedures in MSW programs



Recommendations

- Normalize SEMHI discussions (talk openly about it)
- Introducing wounded healer construct or similar concepts
- Develop policies & supports
- Teaching and practicing self-care/plans
- Integrate reflection & supervision that explores SEMHI benefits and risks



Conclusion

- SEMHI is common among MSW students
- Both asset and risk in practice
- Social work educators may play key role in shaping how students perceive and address SEMHI



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