

The Reflection on Social Work Group Practice Challenges Through Online Medium During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In facing the current global health issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, the practice of social work by using the group method has become very limited. The need for group work that involves meeting with group members becomes very challenging because group meeting should be avoided due to the possibility that it can pose a risk of COVID-19 infection. This paper discusses the challenges faced by social workers in Malaysia when using online medium as the new norm in working with group. This preliminary study opted qualitative method by using document analysis. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. The study data involved 20 fieldwork reports by a total of 20 social workers. The group work had been conducted via online for seven weeks. The group of clients that they handle included 20 groups of final-age teenagers who are studying at a local university. The data of this study were then analysed using content analysis technique. The results of the study showed that there were five main challenges when performing online group work including; (i) unclear reaction of group members, (ii) longer rapport construction, (iii) technical problems, (iv) lack of cohesion among group members and (v) challenges of social worker resilience skills. The creativity of the social workers is highly recommended so that the implementation of online group work can be maximized even if it is not like a face to face session.

Keywords: Group Work, COVID-19, Online, Social Work Practice, Social Worker

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the medium of work for many services from face to face online method. This change also applies to the practice of social work with groups as one of the intervention methods. Group work is a method of social work practice that supports to enhance the social functions of the client through a purposeful group experience.

In general, group work at education institutions is often viewed as being beneficial in developing students' generic skills such as communication, leadership and critical thinking (Samat et al., 2019). Most of the studies (e.g; Balakrishnan (2009); Bistamam (2009); Jamaludin et al (2018); Lee et al (2018); Seyedsalehi et al (2018); Maarof et al (2016) have shown the effectiveness of using group work as a methods of therapy and for client self-development. Group work is an orientation and practice in social work in which a small group of people who shares the same goal with the same problem meets frequently and engages in activities created to achieve a particular objective.

However, the group's goal of being able to hopefully be an auxiliary support to the group members becomes very difficult due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the COVID-19 pandemic currently sweeping the whole world, all are acknowledging that such group-based actions are riskier. To ensure the constant service to clients, social workers have used Information and Communications Technology (ICT), such as social media channels and video conferencing applications (Hung, 2021). Furthermore, as we know that Social Work is a profession that is very closely related with society issues (Mannan et al., 2021). Therefore, the online method is a method that is considered appropriate for constant social work sessions with groups to be implemented in order to help the clients. Feijt's (2020) study showed that mental health professional practitioners also had positive views on the effectiveness of treatment by using online mediums, had reported flexibility, lower contacts, as well as not having to travel long distances. However, there are issues that are challenging including the absence of technological infrastructure, lack of organizational support and procedures, intermediary communication issues such as non-verbal communication and client discordancy. Since online discussion or conference methods are the new norm for most group work practices, there are certainly many challenges that the social workers must go through. In this regard, the question arises as to what are the challenges in implementing group social work methods online, especially in this COVID-19 pandemic period? Therefore, this study was conducted to discover the implementation of group work and its challenges.

Social Work practice in any form of intervention need to be sustain because of the high demand of people in crisis and infected because of the pandemic. Due to the current situation, many people need assistant in mental wellbeing. This phenomenon created more demand in social work services. However, the pandemic makes social work services delay and it limit the accessibility to client especially when it involves group work method of intervention. Accordingly, it is becoming an alternative for social worker-client meetings to be carried out through online mediums. However, there are many challenges to be overcome as it is a new medium in the practice of social work in Malaysian culture. Therefore, this study was conducted to look at the challenges faced by social workers while conducting sessions through online.

Literature Review

Social Work is a field that helps improve the well-being of individuals, families and communities. Various methods of intervention are carried out either through case work, group work or community work. In this study, the focus is on the group work method as this approach has challenges to be practiced during COVID-19 pandemic because it involves risky group activities.

According to Toseland and Rivas (2010), there are two types of groups in social work, namely treatment group and task group. In the treatment group, the communication is open, and members are encouraged to actively interact. Success is measured according to the individual's progress in achieving treatment goals. While in task groups, communication is more structured, and the focus of discussion is on specific issues. Group work can help individuals to adapt to problems and the environment through learning, changing behaviours and improving skills to cope with the dynamic demands of life (Sojan, 2020).

Furthermore, in group work, the supports that emphasize mutually helpful and interdependent behaviours, personal involvement, personal interaction, and active roles with or to other group members are highly emphasized (Zastrow, 2014). According to Abd Manaf (2012), there are three (3) main models that can be used in group work, which include the Social Goals Model (Papell and Ruthman, 1966), Remedial Model (Vinter, 1957) and Reciprocal Model (Schwarz, 1961). The Social Goals Model is designed due to social interests that can bring social returns to the group. This model is intended as a preparation or prevention to something. It is usually used to resolve issues or interests in the community such as Rukun Tetangga (a name of neighbourhood community) Parents and Teachers Association (PTA). The Rehabilitation Model is a rehabilitation, treatment or clinical model. The group is the transforming agent to the members. The group members support and help each other in the group. Social workers need to possess knowledge and skills in helping the group members to achieve self-awareness and enhance their social functionality. The Reciprocal Model is a model that helps individuals to repair relationships with society. This model assumes that the individual can only be understood with assistance in relation to the systems that are around in which the individual is a part of that system. This model sees individuals being created, influenced and changed by the environment through relationships, interactions and social institutions. This model highlights engagement between members when doing something which includes prevention and rehabilitation as a reformation of relationships.

In the pandemic phase of COVID-19, studies show that group work is conducted online. The study of Shara et al. (2020) found that the most common issue raised worldwide in social work practice reflects the difficulties caused by the need for physical distance, especially because the 'telecommunication work' from home via telephone and internet cannot guarantee the privacy of the client due to the presence of his/her family members and/or social workers. Furthermore, some clients are unable to access or use the technology. Research by Fazal has shown that the challenges of using technology are different between young and adult (Manoharan, 2022). Social workers reported difficulty with video calls as not being able to assess the situation at home or detect a potentially risky relationship, look it in the eyes, or smell and feel the atmosphere of the home. Although face to face encounters are possible, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) hinders communication, the ability to take non-verbal cues, the feeling of empathy and the possibility of using physical contact as a caring or reassuring signal.

The results of a study by Sukmana et al (2020) indicated that social workers continued their role in the COVID-19 pandemic season as broker enablers, educators, initiators, public speakers, counsellors, and coordinators while the forms of social work practice were performed indirectly by using the information technology and social media such as WhatsApp

(WA), Short Message Service (SMS), Telegram, mobile phone, Zoom Meet, Google Meet, and Hotline. Some of the restraints faced by the social workers in social work practice in the COVID-19 pandemic era by using IT applications include limited internet and Wi-Fi network access, limited ability and knowledge of social workers on IT, better expertise and deep understanding of customers about IT, and only a small number of customers have cell phones.

Methods

Research Design

This study is a qualitative study using a document analysis approach. This method is used in accordance with the source of information collected by the researcher, namely the Group Work Practice Field Work Report. The documents analysed reflect group work carried out by social workers who are trained and have conducted group work online.

Study Sample

The study composed 20 fieldwork reports by a total of 20 social workers who had undergone group work training for 7 weeks. Apart of improving group work efficiency, training is also important for build up the relationship. According to Saim et al (2020), it is critical to establish a trustworthy relationship between researchers and participants. In grounded theory concept, analysis of the reports revealed the experience of handling group work on a total of 94 participants which consists of four to five people in each group. All participants signed a concern form to participate in this study. They also agreed if reports about them (anonymously) were used for research purposes. They comprise final teenagers who are currently studying in public institutions of higher learning. They are grouped according to the similarity of issues that have been identified such as anxiety about Covid-19, lack of self-confidence, low motivation in lessons and interpersonal problems.

Data Analysis

This study used content analysis as a technique to analyse the data. Bowen (2009) has stated that documents cover a wide variety of types, and content analysis is very useful for getting a broad overview. Content analysis is then used as a “preliminary review of the document” that can give researchers a way to identify meaningful and relevant citations. It involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (through examination), and interpretation. It is a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and developed to understand the phenomenon. The researcher strived for objectivity and sensitivity and maintain the balance between both. Therefore, the concern should not be about ‘how many documents’; rather, it should be about the quality of the documents and the evidence they contain, given the purpose and design of the study (Bowen, 2009). For this study, 20 documents are very sufficient because in the eleventh document, most of the themes have appeared saturated.

Results

There are five main themes of challenges in handling online group work that have been identified from the reflection documents which are (i) unclear reaction of group members, (ii) longer rapport construction, (iii) technical problems, (iv) lack of cohesion among group members and (v) challenges of social worker resilience skills. The table below shows the themes and subthemes that demonstrate the overall results of the findings in achieving the objectives of the study.

Table 1

Themes and subthemes of the Online Group Work Challenge

Main Theme	Unclear reaction of group members	Longer rapport construction	Technical problems	Lack of cohesion among group members	Challenges of social worker resilience skills
Sub theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to see the non-verbal language of the group members • Unclear facial expressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group members are less interested in having video conferences • Long sessions to build rapport • group members are more likely to wait for the social worker to inquire • Rapport is assisted outside the session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak internet connection disrupts the session • Switching the online platform mediums • Waiting for a turn to speak limits confession 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although group sessions have been frequent, the clients are still a bit sceptical • Difficulty in uniting the group members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissatisfaction with the practice carried out • Responsive with personal values
Number of groups	20	18	16	11	9

There are 5 main themes along with 12 subthemes that have been identified in the analysis that conducted. Further explanations are related to the reflections that have been done according to the identified themes.

Group Members' Reactions Are Not Clear

The results of the study found that all the reactions given by the group members were less clear. Although this situation is not a major issue but the atmosphere like this is less evocative of the mood of the group session. An informant in his document reported that group work is very challenging when conducted online. The informant was unable to see the non-verbal reactions such as eye movements and physicality of the group members.

Creating group work assignments online is indeed too challenging for social workers. The constraints in conducting group work online can be divided into three segments namely problems on the part of social workers, problem of internet line stability and problems on the part of clients. Social workers cannot see the client's

body language, eye movements and physical structure. There is an inadequacy in term of human touch. (Document 7)

Informants always try to see verbal and non-verbal reactions from the client but are often unsuccessful and unsatisfied because of video displays that do not show the client's entire physicality. The informant disclosed that the eye contact was an inaccurate and he was unsure who the client was looking at when the session was in progress. This situation is alarming to social workers as they cannot identify the real reaction when the session is conducted online.

Clients who do not like opening videos are asked to open them. Social workers sometimes need to enlarge the client's video to see the client's reaction clearly, but it is still less satisfactory because the video display does not show the client's entire physical. Eye contact is also inaccurate because it is uncertain who the client is looking at. (Document 16)

The online environment was also reported to be quieter rather than talking because every group member seemed to be waiting to hear from the informant. Group members listen to instructions more, speak only when asked and take turns telling/expressing stories. This situation may be due to the need to press the 'mute and unmute' icons as opposed to talking face to face, which is not necessary.

This causes conversations and ways to obtain information to be difficult, static and unable to meet original expectations. Clients are also slow in giving feedback and have to wait for their turn to give an opinion. Interruptions cannot be made spontaneously and immediately. There is a difficulty in immersing into the client's feelings due to limited space to see the facial reactions and eye movements. (Document 13)

Longer Rapport with Social Workers

All informants reported that more time had to be allocated to build the rapport. This is because the client has never come face to face with social worker, so it is difficult to gain the trust in the social worker. There are many among the group members who refuse to hold meetings online. They are more comfortable with the use of WhatsApp than other online mediums. One informant reported his frustration when the clients refused to cooperate, and some did not reply to WhatsApp and their reaction started to slow down as if they did not agree to have an online meeting.

The Social Workers were very upset at the time because they (clients) seemed less interested to communicate via video calls and refused to cooperate with them. After the social workers informed that the meeting was through a video call, the members' response began to slow down, they started to not give response if the social workers sent a message on WhatsApp ... (Document 13)

The informants mentioned that they needed to find ways to get the group members to be interested to engage in the online sessions. One of the ways was by contacting them through the WhatsApp application at the planning phase. However, what happened was there

were times when the social workers contacted the client, they were more interested in expressing their feelings to the client in person through the WhatsApp medium even though the best way to do the confessions was actually during the group session. This is because the purpose of group work is to encourage them to gain skills on how to be responsive to their problems through other group members. That is why, this online-based rapport process is quite time-consuming as compared to if they were face to face session.

Rapport was created in the planning phase through WhatsApp because the social workers never met the members directly and did not even know the group members. This approach is important so that the clients are not surprised and agree to meet online. However, the situation is still difficult for some members as they are not yet ready. This situation is quite time-consuming. (Document 5)

According to the second informant, he took three sessions just for the purpose of building a rapport with the group members. Social workers played a better role in liven up the atmosphere. However, at this stage, the group members only answered the social worker's questions without initiating a conversation or questioning. This situation made the group work atmosphere somewhat static and quieter.

Three sessions were conducted during the rapport construction phase alone. In this initial phase, all members are still sceptical of social workers. They are less friendly in communicating. The social workers play a vital role to enliven the atmosphere. The members only answer the questions from the social workers. There is no conversation which makes the atmosphere more rigid. Members are more silent and only wait for their turn to be questioned. Members do not initiate inquiries to the social workers. (Document 2)

Technical Aspects

Many informants agreed that the technical problem of internet coverage greatly disrupted the course of the group session. There was an informant through his report stating that the group members had to join and leave the group's online medium because the network (line) in his home area was unstable. This situation interrupted the course of the session greatly because it sometimes hinders the meeting. Occasionally, they also had to end the meeting session early because of the instability internet network in the home area of the group members.

At the beginning of the meeting, the problem of poor internet coverage in the home area of group members caused the initial meeting to be ended earlier due to the lesser number of group members. However, the next meeting is then scheduled for the next day. During the second meeting, technical problems and limitations in the use of the Zoom application stalled the meeting for the second time. (Document 7)

This internet coverage problem is also experienced in the intermediate phase. An informant who had started to be friendly with other members of the group felt disturbed just because of the bad internet coverage that caused the friendliness to be considered stunted. They tried to use other platforms but not all group members have the same internet strength to communicate with each other.

At this phase, the level of cohesion of group members with the Social Workers is progressively friendly. However, the constraints of weak internet coverage in their area became a disruption that caused the sessions in this phase to be somewhat stunted. Therefore, the Google Meet was chosen to continue this online session. However, not all group members were able to give their full commitment to the sessions conducted due to unstable internet coverage (Document 13)

As for informant 9, they often switch online application mediums due to high data usage issue. There were times they chose to only use video via WhatsApp, but the coverage was not very smooth which was very disruptive to the session and eventually it had to be ended early.

Group members have agreed to use Skype app at first and then switched to WhatsApp call medium as it doesn't require a high data usage, even when the app allows 8 people to be online at the same time. However, the session conducted was not smooth compared to when using Skype and the session had to be completed early. This situation disrupts the course of the session and the planning that has been done (Document 9)

Trust Issues among the Group Members

Since all members of the group have never been able to meet face to face, then the trust of fellow group members is quite difficult to obtain albeit trust is the core thing to ensure the success of a group. Group members seemed hesitant to express their feelings and needed a lot of help from the social workers. Social workers try to ask question after question to support the confessions being done.

Despite having met three times, the members of this group are still hesitant and still have not dared to open their mouths to express certain sensitive matters. Members are still much helped by the social workers to start conversations. To liven up the conversation atmosphere, the social workers must ask more questions. (Document 11)

In helping to create a sense of comfort and trust, most social workers strive to perform a variety of activities that can evoke trust, increase camaraderie and support group members to be more cohesive. However, the activities carried out are very limited because the inability to perform the activities together. According to informant 11, he used various creativity to create a feeling of togetherness, but it remained difficult because the group members were in different places and there was no interaction during the process of completing the task.

The activities conducted are very limited. The original purpose was to unite them through activities that made them feel comfortable, but it was very difficult to be completed. In a drawing activity for an example, clients have to draw in their respective homes, so the process of interaction does not take place among group members. This causes them to feel less excited to be together. (Document 19)

Informants strongly expect the group members to feel comfortable when they are together. Although the closeness has begun to be visible, but the fact is that from the informant's eyes, it is not perceptible and still has not reached the desired level.

The assumption of the current social worker in the intermediate phase is that group members have been comfortable, do not hesitate to express feelings, can trust and help each other. However, this was less visible in the session as anticipated. Although intimacy exists, but it still does not reach a high level. (Document 7)

Issues of Values and Responsive Skills as a Social Worker

Through the report, few of the informants revealed that they were facing the value issue when they felt dissatisfied with various aspects of conducting online sessions. According to the 12th informant through his report, *"The course of activities for this phase is relatively slow with the cooperation of each member of the group. Social workers also feel dissatisfied because this activity is done online and there are too many constraints"*.

In addition, there were informants who were conflicted with a sense of guilt for having to diminish the rules within the group. In overcoming the limitations of creating maximum impact through group work because it is online, most informants try to make rules so that all members turn on the video setting. Yet, there are still among the group members who refused to turn on the setting despite being asked to do so because the internet coverage in their area. In this case, there are informants who are unable to encounter the problem because the line situation worsens when they turn off the setting of the video. Informant 16 reported that members of his group living in Sabak Bernam, Selangor had to walk to the front of the village just to get a stable internet line as he mentioned in his statement, *"The situation makes social workers feel guilty because a client had to walk to the front side of his village just to get better internet coverage"*. This situation requires consideration from the social workers to lessen group conditions. *"Social workers had to reconsider the rules they wanted to create because they felt it was unfair to other group members"*.

There were also informants who expressed frustration with the practice carried out. They must be resilient to overcome that feeling of frustration which is personal judgmental value. In the early stage, the informant almost gave up because he felt the group members refused to communicate and cooperate.

The Social Workers were very upset at the time because they (group members) seemed less interested in communicating via video calls and refused to cooperate with the social workers. The thought of giving up also exists (Document 3)

Meanwhile, there were informants who had to be firm by asking their group members to meet online. However, through the reflections and the guidance of peers and lecturers, informants began to be more open-minded and acknowledged the need for them to have good coping skills and not to be punitive to clients.

Social workers had to insist and insist on asking group members to cooperate to engage in video meetings. Support sessions help the social workers to deal with a variety of group issues. Lecturers guide social workers and often help explain what actions to take next. In addition, the peers also provided insights on the issues raised. (Document 5)

Discussion

Overall, the study found that the challenges of implementing online practices are closely related to the barriers caused by technological limitations. In line with the findings discovered by Feijt (2020), the use of technology is seen to present a significant challenge to obtain a robust rapport. The results of this study show that relationship building which is the rapport while performing group work through the online mediums requires longer sessions compared to face to face method. This is since the communication in visual form is less able to give a sense of trust to social workers in a short time compared to face to face meeting. Blanchard (2021) stated that the process of decision-making, introducing oneself and getting to know others in a group, as well as the development of group members' attitudes require more time for online session than face to face method. Accordingly, social workers need to give participants more space to build trust with the social workers. According to Hales et al (2021) who studied group work in the context of employment, the lack of informal communication makes it difficult to establish relationships between groups, especially for new employees. While senior employees have the advantage of getting to know their co-workers, on the contrary, for new employees and this situation makes the socialization of new employees very difficult. This means that there is a possibility that the formation of groups in social work is more appropriate for those who have met face to face than those who have never met or in the situation of new client.

The results of the study also found that the reactions of group members were not clear during the session. Numerous non-verbal behaviours and communications are invisible to the social workers. Social workers are not able to see the reactions of group members perfectly because the visuals on the computer screen can only display the parts showed by the client. These findings are in line with the study by Khalil et al (2020) who pointed out that among the online challenges is the non-verbal communication such as eye contact, gestures, and postures which are a major part of all aspects of communication and it is vital to have the feeling of closeness while communicating. Yet, the ability to see non-verbal communication through the digital space is impaired (Kenny, 2021). Therefore, the social workers can provide encouragement by using non-verbal communication during the rapport stage. Social workers also acknowledged that there were often technical problems and disruptions in the implementation of group work sessions. Problematic internet networks sometimes cause the clients to have to turn off their videos or to frequently log in and out of the online sessions due to the technical variabilities. Kenny's (2021) study found that respondents perceive technology as stress and fatigue in two ways namely first, stress and fatigue related to resources and using new technology, getting used to, organizing oneself in relation to the equipment. While secondly, working online causes fatigue and stress more than working face to face.

Through this study as well, cohesion and unity among group members were revealed to be quite difficult to achieve in the online medium. The activities performed are restricted depending on the suitability of the online medium, and most of the appropriate assignments still involve individual assignments and not groups due to the limitations of the virtual world. A study by Hung et al (2021) found that group dynamics are constrained because online mediums cause significant interactions in the form of body language and nonverbal communication to decrease and even disappear altogether. They prefer not to interact with each other. Online group interactions tend to be planned and more formal (Blanchard &

McBride, 2019), whereas face to face communication sometimes involves unplanned social interactions and it aids collective cognitive development of a problem as well as mutual understanding of peers involved in the group (Leonardi, 2018). According to Blanchard (2021), many processes in a group depend on the limited time spent online collectively, the view of the arrangement of communication partners on the screen display, and the different online physical environments. It is recognized that processes in groups take longer to be developed in the online platforms.

The challenges faced by social workers sometimes lead to professional issues where several social workers feel dissatisfied with the sessions conducted because the interactions that take place cannot reflect the overall situation of the client. The process of interaction among members when a task or activity is given cannot be seen accurately. A study conducted by Kenny (2021) showed that many therapists appreciate that online technology can handle tasks that feel very enormous and challenging but don't want to fully live in a 'zoom' world. In Singapore, according to Lim et al (2020), psychosocial group work is carried out by social workers to immigrant groups by adopting safe behaviours such as social distancing because the conduct of virtual group work is very limited. Therefore, in performing online group work, social workers should be prepared to deal with the issues as discussed. Social workers should also be able to access group dynamics and intervene effectively (Trevor and Orton, 2014).

Recommendations and Conclusions

From the results stated, the challenges that arise are not only to the course of the session in the group but in fact more than that which involves issues of professionalism such as the values and skills of social workers group. The creativity of social workers such as using interactive activities or software is highly recommended so that the implementation of group work can be given to the maximum level even if it is unlike a face to face environment. Chong et al (2011) indicate that active members were relatively more trusting in group. This is important to ensure that clients continue to benefit in any situation, including in the challenging phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is suggested that in order to provide online services to clients through group work method, training of a practical nature should be given to the social workers. Continuous and effective training can help the social workers to perform group work effectively from a technical aspect and eventually help the social workers to deal with issues of values, ethics and professionalism. A creative and client- friendly manual can also help online sessions to be more engaging and ultimately foster camaraderie. It is proposed for future studies to deepen the aspect of professionalism among social workers who use online medium as a practical continuation.

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