

An exploration of female social work students' participation in online and face-to-face self-help groups

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Abstract: *This article reviews findings of a small, exploratory study of 45 female, masters-level social work students who participated face-to-face or online in course required self-help groups. Explored with both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were reasons for female students' choice of group medium and satisfaction with peer support in both types of groups. A range of supportive acts and behaviors were reported in the qualitative data although there were few statistically significant differences in quantitative peer support scores when grouped by face-to-face and online group membership. Contributions from research on the relational theory of women's development and group psychotherapy are suggested to help in developing online learning environments geared towards female learners.*

Key words: *computer-mediated communications, groups, women, Internet, self-help*

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Introduction

Online degree programs and courses, also referred to as e-learning, continue to evolve in human services. This mirrors the response of other disciplines to accelerating demands from industry and society for a professional workforce with state-of-the art knowledge and skills (Zafeiriou et al., 2001). Web-based curricula is considered the 'second wave of e-commerce' because of exponential growth in student enrollments (Wang et al., 2003; Werner, 2001).

Despite being potential major consumers of online human service content, there is a dearth of information about female social work students' e-learning experiences. The majority of social work students are female, many older and with families (Lennon, 2000); research on e-learning reveals that major consumers are also older women with families and jobs (US Department of Education, 2002). Should the social work profession not adapt to the pervasive presence of electronic technology, the risk is eventual isolation (Holt et al., 1998).

One beginning step to address this gap was a small, exploratory study of 45 female, American, master's level, social work students. They participated in course required, self-help groups to help ameliorate the toll of role strain; enacting the multiple roles of graduate student, paid worker, family caregiver, and/or significant other. Students participated either face-to-face or online through WebCT chat rooms (a course management program that enables online learning). This exercise provided a unique learning opportunity; nowhere else in the social work curriculum were online groups addressed. Despite the proliferation of online groups, models of social work practice do not yet address their distinguishing features (Schopler, Abell and Galinsky, 1998).

This study explored reasons for female social work students' choice of group medium and satisfaction with peer support in both types of groups. Contributions from research on the relational theory of women's development and group psychotherapy are suggested to help in developing online learning environments geared towards female learners.

Literature review

The impact of the internet: online self-help, social work education and e-learning

Self-help groups are a permanent part of our culture and proliferate both on and off-line. Estimates report over 25,000 publicly accessible online groups (Meier, 2000) with 11 million persons in the United States participating in self-help groups each year; these numbers continue to rise (Braithwaite, Waldron and Finn, 1999). Since the advent of the Internet, online self-help groups are now a major way for numerous people to locate information and forums for emotional support about a wide range of health and mental health concerns. Underscoring this point are estimates showing that six million of the 29 million men and 26 million women in the United States use the World Wide Web each day to seek out health and medical information (LaCoursiere, 2001). With this explosion of online mental health services, the strengths and challenges posed by online groups are important for social workers to consider; for-profit companies now aggressively market to them about providing these services (O'Neil, 2000).

Conclusions from a study examining participation in both online and offline support groups by sufferers of 20 illnesses provide insight into their popularity; 'the online domain may well be useful in bringing together those who suffer from rare and debilitating conditions, in which getting together physically would present a number of practical barriers ... and the online community allows for anonymity' (Davidson, et al., 2000: 211). A survey of participants in online mental health groups also overwhelmingly perceived these groups as beneficial. Reasons included opportunities to gain knowledge, share, provide support, and convenience (Zinn, Simon and Orme, 1997). Although there were not any positive changes on quantitative measures of support, a study of social workers who participated in a computer-based group to help cope with stress showed effectiveness in qualitative measures of group support, encouragement, and advice (Meier, 1997).

Research on the Internet and related technology in social work education and practice continues to evolve. After exposure to a classroom simulation of a computer group with master's level social work students, reports were that they had increased knowledge of,

comfort with computer groups, and were more likely to use this type of group with clients (Abell and Galinsky, 2002). Integrating the use of email into social work courses was reported to increase students' comfort level with technology and build their confidence (Finn, 1995). Cognitively oriented approaches to computer instruction that integrate these applications across a variety of computer programs appeared to benefit direct practice students (Monnickendam and Markus, 1997).

Many universities actively develop and offer a range of online degrees, certificates, and courses. The percentage of two and four-year degree-granting institutions offering distance education courses has grown from 33 to 44 percent between 1995 and 1997, and the number of such courses has nearly doubled. In 1997, one-fifth of the nation's two and four-year degree granting institutions also planned to start offering distance education courses in the next three years (Lewis et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Demographics further underscore the importance of understanding the preferences, needs and experiences of female social work students who participate in e-learning. Women comprise the majority of social work students with many considered 'nontraditional'; older students juggling the multiple demands of school, work and family (Lennon, 2000). A recent national survey reported that major consumers of undergraduate distance education were older women with families and jobs who were drawn to distance education, more so when compared to other groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Method

Participants

Study participants comprised 45 female students who, in the spring semesters of 2001 and 2002, enrolled in four sections of a master's level, advanced practice class at a large, public, urban, southeastern university located in the United States. As part of the course requirements, students participated in four weekly, one-hour long, peer self-help groups. Included in this exploratory study were the 11 questionnaires completed by participants in the online self-help

groups and 34 questionnaires completed by the participants in the face-to-face self-help groups.

The self-help group exercise

Students chose to participate either in a face-to-face or online self-help group for the four-week duration of this exercise. The topic was coping with role strain, multiple demands that conflict with each other and cause difficulty in fulfilling role obligations. This was the focus because role strain is implicated in contributing to burnout in human service workers (Pearlin, 1989; Thoits, 1983). For human service workers, social support has been shown to ameliorate the effects of burnout; job related stress-involving feelings of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and futility (Maslach, 2003). This self-help group exercise exposed students to a stress reducing experience that encouraged social support while simultaneously developing group work skills helpful for clients.

The instructor randomly assigned students to a closed group of four to five students. Group leadership rotated weekly to afford each student the opportunity to both lead and participate. The face-to-face groups were held during the second half of class and the online group members scheduled times (day or night) during the week that were convenient for all. This self-help group experience was supplemented with readings about online groups and a lecture focusing on synchronous and asynchronous methods of online support and communication. Participants in online groups were also given an orientation by the instructor about using the chat room function in WebCT.

Measures

After the self-help groups terminated, female MSW-level students were invited to complete an anonymous 27-item questionnaire that included demographics, the Peer Adequacy Subscale of the Multidimensional Support Scale (Winefield, Winefield and Tiggemann, 1992) and a checklist of reasons for their choice of group format.

Weekly group notes and open-ended comments were also reviewed. In both types of group, each weekly session note was reviewed for

the content and frequency of supportive acts and/or behaviors: emotional support (e.g. concern, listening, trust); appraisal support (e.g. affirmation, social comparison, feedback); informational support (e.g. advice, suggestions, information); and instrumental support (e.g. time, aid in kind, modifying the environment) (House, 1981).

The Multidimensional Support Scale

The Multidimensional Support Scale (MDSS) (Winefield, Winefield and Tiggemann, 1992) measures the frequency and adequacy of emotional, practical and informational aspects of social support from three sources - confidants, peers and supervisors. Participants rated the frequency on a 4-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (4) and their satisfaction on a 3-point scale: would have liked more (1), would have liked less (2), it was just right (3) (Winefield, Winefield and Tiggemann, 1992). The 6-item Peer Adequacy Subscale was chosen for inclusion because this captured the source of social support; peers who participated in the self-help groups.

Overall, the MDSS has alphas for the subscales that range from .81 to .90. It also has good concurrent validity, with significant correlations with three measures of psychological well-being: Rosenberg's Self-Esteem and Depressive Affect scales and the General Health Questionnaire. This suggests the MDSS is a flexible assessment that can be adapted for use with different populations and used for both detailed studies of coping with specific stressors as well as broader epidemiological studies (Fisher and Corcoran, 1994; Winefield, Winefield and Tiggemann, 1992).

Data analysis

Sample demographics

The participants (see Table 1) ranged in age from 22 to 58; the mean age was 37 (SD = 10). The majority identified themselves as either White-Non Hispanic or African American (53% and 24%, respectively). Other participants identified themselves as Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islanders, and mixed heritage or other ethnic/racial

Female social work students' participation in online and face-to-face self-help groups

Table 1
Characteristics of participants (N=45)

Mean Age 37 (SD = 10)	
	%
Race/ethnicity	
White, non Hispanic	53
African American	24
Hispanic	11
Mixed Heritage / other racial/ethnic	7
Asian/Pacific Islanders	4
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Degrees completed	
BA/BS only	71
BSW	7
MS./MA	22
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Technology Demographics	
<i>Experience with computers</i>	
Extensive experience	4
Quite a lot of experience	58
Some experience	27
Very limited experience	9
No experience	2
<i>Online Discussion/Chat Rooms</i>	
Do not participate	58
Do participate	42

Profiles do not sum to 100 due to rounding

origin (11%, 4%, and 6% respectively). The majority was full-time and the rest were part-time graduate social work students (73% and 27%, respectively).

A range of advanced degrees was reported. The majority had completed one advanced degree; a Bachelor of Science or Arts (40% and 31%, respectively). Others, though few, had received a Bachelor of Social Work (7%). In addition to their undergraduate degree, several students also had completed a Masters level degree in Arts, Science, or another type of Masters level degree (11%, 7%, and 4%, respectively).

All students reported owning their own computer and having access to a computer when they were not at school or at work. However, they reported a range of prior experience with computers. Very few (4%) reported having extensive experience (e.g., I can do computer programming); the majority (58%) reported having quite a lot of experience with computers (e.g., know how to use data bases); some (27%) reported having some experience with computers (e.g., know how to use a word processor); and very few reported (9%) having very limited experience (e.g., I know how to type). Only one student (2.2%) reported having no experience with computers. The majority (62%) reported having attended computer-training courses. The majority of students (58%) did not participate in online discussions and/or chat rooms.

Frequency of factors reported for choice of group by students' status

The majority of both full-time and part-time students (73% and 83%, respectively) most frequently reported convenience as the reason for their choice of group (Table 2). For full-time students, the other most frequently reported reasons for choosing a type of group were: this type of group would best provide emotional support, feeling most comfortable participating in this type of group, this type of group experience would best help when assisting clients, and experience with this type of group would be helpful when seeking MSW-level employment (70%, 55%, 48%, and 39%, respectively). Part-time students most frequently reported their reasons for choice of group as: this type of group experience would best help when assisting clients, feeling most comfortable in this type of group, feeling this type of group would best provide emotional support, experience with this type of group would be helpful when seeking MSW-level employment, and not having access to the Internet (66%, 63%, 45%, 30% and 8%, respectively).

Relations between student's status and choice of group

The following question was addressed (see Table 3): do full-time and part-time female MSW-levels students differ in their reasons for choosing the face-to-face or online self –help group? There was

Table 2
Part and full-time students' reasons for choosing face-to-face or online self –help group (N=45)

	Full-time (n=33)	Part-time (n = 12)
	%	%
Convenience – best fit into my schedule	73	83
Experience with this type of group would best help me assist clients in my job and/or field placement	48	66
Experience with this type of group would be the most helpful when seeking MSW-level employment	39	30
I felt most comfortable participating in this type of self-help group	55	63
I did not have access to the Internet	0	1
I felt that emotional support is best provided by this type of group	70	45

a statistically significant difference in the 'I feel emotional support is best provided by this type of group' scores of full-time and part-time students (.016, $p < .05$). There was no statistically significant difference in the other scores: participated in chat/online discussions (-.247, $p < .05$), have attended computer training (-.818, $p < .05$), this type of group experience would best help when assisting clients (.080, $p < .05$), feeling most comfortable in this type of group (.158, $p < .05$), experience with this type of group would be helpful when seeking MSW-level employment (.114, $p < .05$), and not having access to the Internet (.199, $p < .05$).

Table 3
Full and part-time students' reasons for choosing face-to-face or online self-help group (N=45)

Variable	Mann-Whitney U ^a	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Convenience – best fit into my schedule	147.000	-1.406	.160
Experience with this type of group would best help me assist clients in my job and/or field placement	128.000	-1.749	.080
Experience with this type of group would be the most helpful when seeking MSW-level employment	131.000	-1.578	.114
I felt most comfortable participating in this type of self-help group	140.000	-1.410	.158
I did not have access to a computer and the Internet	163.000	-1.285	.199
I felt that emotional support is best provided by this type of group	106.500	-2.412	.016*

* $p < .05$

Female social work students' participation in online and face-to-face self-help groups

Table 4
MDSS Peer Support Subscale by the grouping variable: face-to-face and online self-help groups (N=45)

Variable	Mann-Whitney U ^a	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
How often did they really listen to you when you talked about your concerns or problems?	176.500	-.304	.761
Would have liked them to listen more often	127.000	-2.194	.028*
How often did you feel that they were really trying to understand your problems?	159.500	-.780	.436
Would have liked them to try to understand more often	169.000	-.545	.586
How often did they try to take your mind off your problems by telling jokes or chattering about other things?	181.500	-.161	.872
Would have liked them to tell jokes or chatter more often.	182.500	-.138	.891
How often did they help you in practical ways, Would have liked them to answer questions or give advice more often.	166.000	-.682	.495
How often could you use them as examples of how to deal with your problems?	172.000	-.434	.664
Would have liked to use them as examples more often.	137.000	-1.583	.113

* $p < .05$

Relations between the MDSS Peer Support Subscale and face-to-face and online self-help groups

The following question was addressed (see Table 4): do face-to-face and online female self-help group members differ in terms of their level of satisfaction with peer support?

There was a statistically significant difference in the 'would have liked them to listen more often' scores of face-to-face and online self-help group members (.028, $p < .05$). There were no other statistically significant differences in the scores of any other items of the MDSS Peer Support Subscale.

Summary of group notes: supportive acts and behaviors

Weekly notes were self-reports by the groups' facilitators about the sessions' topics and themes. For each type of group, themes and/or topics were reviewed and categorized based on four broad categories of supportive acts or behaviors; emotional support, appraisal support, informational support, instrumental support (House, 1981).

In both the face-to-face and online groups, a wide range of supportive acts and behaviors were reported (see Table 5). Those participating in both the face-to-face and online groups (44% and 36%, respectively) least frequently reported instrumental support. Those participating in the face-to-face and online groups (44% and 36%, respectively) most frequently reported informational support. The following excerpts taken directly from the session notes illustrate examples of supportive acts or behaviors in the face-to-face groups:

Sharing our fears about flying in planes. (emotional support)

Sharing feelings about being really exhausted and overwhelmed by all the work we need to get done by the end of the semester. (emotional support)

Comparing the different expectations of teachers in this program. (appraisal support)

We shared information about job openings. (informational support)

Giving last week's class notes to someone in our group who missed classes because she had a car accident. (instrumental support)

The following excerpts taken directly from the sessions' notes

Table 5
Frequency of supportive acts or comments reported in group notes

Content Area	Face-to-face (n=204)		Online (n=39)	
	%	n	%	n
Emotional support	33	68	36	14
Appraisal support	21	42	26	10
Informational support	44	89	36	14
Instrumental support	2	5	2	1

illustrate examples of supportive acts or behaviors in the online groups:

The role spirituality plays in how we handle situations. (emotional support).

Difficulties of being pregnant, going to school, and working. (emotional support)

Reflection on why each member wanted to be a social worker. (appraisal support).

Disclosing our political and religious affiliations. (appraisal support)

Build up of anger and how to deal with it. (informational support).

Effectiveness of online chat rooms and how to deal with technical difficulties. (informational support)

Scheduling around a group member who is pregnant and not feeling well. (instrumental support)

Discussion

For some participants, online groups are perceived to hinder relationships because of an inability in cyberspace to hear tones of voices and see body language, eyes, and facial expressions; hence, the 'coldness' of internet-mediated communications. This is consistent with a prior study on the use of computer technology in clinical practice. Practitioners were concerned that computer groups were impersonal and they feared negative implications for anonymity among users, for example, lying about one's identity (Galinsky et al.,

1997). The following quotes represent voices from female students who disparaged online groups:

Computers seem artificial and impersonal and my server is finicky. I want to get to know people and the best way to do this is face-to-face. I don't believe Internet chat groups are beneficial enough to give support.

The face-to-face I found very beneficial - using the Internet seems less personal and cold.

Support online is not as effective as being in the presence of others. It is difficult to express anger and excitement through Emoticons and capitalization.

Connecting with others, observing body language, and having eye contact were most valuable for me.

For those female students who need auditory and non-verbal communication when developing relationships, cyberspace poses formidable obstacles. However, the current lack of visual, tonal and non-verbal cues that now characterize online communication are becoming obsolete. There are rapid advances in web cam technology and streaming media; in the near future, seeing and speaking with others online in real time may be a normative occurrence.

For other participants, online groups were a convenient self-help option that provided opportunities for mutual aid. For example, when computer problems threatened the viability for one member of an online group to continue, all the other members rallied to find a solution to her problem. Through their efforts and encouragement, she was able to continue.

Some of these online group participants did not see the anonymity of cyberspace as deterring connections with others or self-disclosure. This is consistent with conclusions of a study of individuals who sought supports online; the anonymity freed them to self disclose about embarrassing or stigmatizing illnesses (Davidson, et al. 2000). The following quotes represent voices of female students who felt positively about online groups:

The fact that I can log on at a convenient time at home was helpful to me being a single mom.

I go online several times a week in a single parenting chat room. I have gotten a lot of advice and support from this group and think I've also been

able to provide this support to other single moms. Hope this helps me with clients too!

Anonymous and very convenient. When I say anonymous, I mean that by not looking into someone's eyes I could feel anonymous. This gave me insight into how a client might react to online groups or therapy.

I didn't feel I would disclose as much as I did in this type of group support. I felt comfortable talking with the other members and I felt they were comfortable also. This made the atmosphere, although via cyberspace, comforting and maybe even heard more ... because there are (written) words and I felt I had a better grasp.

The process of the online group was fairly fluid. Although there were several problems with computer 'glitches,' the group ran smoothly with each person having ample opportunity to process and share their personal experiences in the online group setting.

Choosing a group medium because it was convenient was the most frequently reported reason for choice of group format by all students in this study (see Table 2). There was no statistically significant difference in convenience scores (see Table 3) when grouped by participation face-to-face or online (-1.406, $P < .05$). This may reflect all students having a chance to decide whether they wanted to complete the group exercise assignment during regular class time, or select a mutually acceptable time (day or night) with online group members to chat. Both options presumably resulted in a best fit for their schedules that did not interfere with other commitments (e.g. family, work). Convenience has been found to be important when considering why students drop out of e-learning. A recent study reports that time conflicts with work and family play a large role in students' dropping out of these courses (Wang et al., 2003).

When scores for the MDSS Peer Support Scale were grouped by face-to-face or online group participation (see Table 4), statistical significance was reported for one item, 'I would have liked them (group members) to listen more often to my concerns or problems.' (.028, $p < .05$).

This finding may reflect two aspects of the self-help group exercise. Firstly, online group participants may have negatively reacted to problems they experienced in synchronous online communication;

computer glitches, delays in response time, rapid pace of interaction, tracking other members' participation (Abell and Galinsky, 2002). These problems are frustrating, time consuming, and take time away from communicating about concerns and problems. Secondly, there were also only four weekly, one-hour self-help group sessions; all students may have felt these time constraints truncated time for them to have others listen to their problems and concerns.

When further attempting to understand this finding, it seems important to consider that the Multidimensional Support Scale was validated with samples reflecting upon the frequency and adequacy of social support in face-to-face encounters; the phraseology of items reflect this (e.g. listening to you when you talked about your problems, helped you in practical ways such as doing things). Currently, a gap in knowledge exists about the validity and reliability of the MDSS when used online.

Despite a lack of significant findings for other items in the Peer Support Subscale, students' written comments and session notes indicate a range in and frequency of supportive acts and behaviors occurring in both types of groups (see Table 5). Similarly, Meier's (1997) study of an online support group for social workers found no positive changes on quantitative measures of coping and support but qualitative measures showed members' feeling helped by the groups' encouragement, support and advice.

The evolving research on technology in social work practice and education reports challenging findings and identifies gaps in knowledge about online group interventions, process, leadership and effectiveness (Abell and Galinsky, 2002; Finn, 1995). These processes have often been identified in face-to-face groups but less information exists about them in online groups (Finn; 1999, Meier, 2000) as these are still in the early stages of being studied. Analysis of data in this study mirrors such observations.

Conclusion

Limitations of this study included the small sample size, a scale that has not been used before to measure online social support, and time limitations for the self-help group exercise. Yet the data, especially the qualitative, indicates that self-help group members tend to receive social support and mutual aid from their peers. This self-help group exercise appears to be a viable educational experience, and the online component worthy of inclusion in group work course content.

Future research about the processes and effectiveness of online groups (including classes) with women participants may consider contributions from the relational theory approach and group psychotherapy. The four relational curative factors derived from studies of women's therapy groups include validation of one's experience, empowerment to act in relationships, development of self-empathy, and connections that foster mutuality (Fedele and Harrington, 1989). Instilling these factors into online pedagogy through collaborative activities, such as online self-help groups, may help meet the relational needs of female students while providing a learner centered educational experience. Without efforts to decrease 'threats' to developing relationships online (e.g. anonymity) mentioned in this study (also see: Galinsky, 1997), participation in e-learning and other online activities may be prematurely avoided or aborted. Such closing off from online learning may have a disproportionate effect on female students who have families and jobs, yet strive to continue their education.

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