

# SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON INTRODUCED MEASURES AND MEDIA COVERAGE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## ABSTRACT

*Introduced measures to deal with COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia affected everyday life of people. Media coverage during the pandemic played a significant role in providing verified information, protecting human health and well-being. In order to gain insight into the reactions of social work students on introduced measures and media coverage about these measures during the state of emergency in Republic of Serbia, an analysis of reflective journals is presented. Eighty reflective journals were analyzed, where students' reactions on introduced measures and media coverage related to these measures are monitored and linked to the electronic archive of the public media service Radio Television of Serbia news. Students' thoughts on several identified measures are presented and analyzed together with their reactions on media coverage about these measures. Findings indicate the important role of the content and ways of media repor-*

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*ting in creation of reflections, as well as the importance of using reflective journals in both education and preservation of mental health. Possible directions of mental health improvement through media coverage in crisis situations and recommendations for education of social workers are presented.*

## INTRODUCTION

The influence of media in the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic plays a significant role in mobilizing entire communities, providing information, emotional support and helping isolated individuals access the necessary resources (Sommariva et al., 2018; Ahmed, 2020; Kim et al, 2020). In addition to being useful, the media can also have a negative impact on people due to high exposure to different media content and inability to distinguish official from fake news (Tandoc et al., 2017; De Keersmaecker and Roets, 2017; Guess et al., 2019). This kind of »info-demia« has a potentially negative impact on people's health and well-being. Given that we live in the age of information technology, it is important to address the impact of media services in transmitting information which were important for ensuring safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sudden changes that followed the pandemic posed great challenges to the general public, but also to people working in helping professions (Ajudković and Rezo Bagarić, 2021). Social work students, as future helping professionals, encountered challenges regarding changes in the way they were receiving knowledge; transferring to online learning platforms influenced ways in which they were receiving and learning skills and competences critical for their future work (Afrouz, 2021). As the practice of interactional skills was limited, the self-reflection skills emerged as a useful alternative.

This notion set a ground for creating a new task for students in their final year of social policy and social work at the Belgrade University during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The new situation was perceived both as an instrument to check personal well-being and an opportunity to learn about the meaning of reflections in social work from personal experiences. Presented journals offer a window into students' lives and provide insights into their emotions during the emergency state caused by COVID-19 in the Republic of Serbia.

In social work, the importance of reflection is great and it can be said to be a key factor in the professional development. In the literature, reflection is defined as a »process in which practitioners restructure the interpersonal theories of action which they bring with them and that affect their professional lives« (Schön, 1983:353).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this research, we recognize that, while restrictive measures and media coverage may trigger different individual emotional responses, these responses nonetheless reveal information relevant to understanding the role of reflection in education and practice of social workers. The theory that supports this research is therefore informed by three areas: reflective learning theory, grounded theory and crisis management.

### The reflective learning theory

Reflection is a type of emotional insight that is supported by reflective activity (Moon, 2004) and it is relevant for all aspects of living (Fook, 2015). It includes self – awareness and ability to create knowledge (Fook, 2015) by encompassing the context of creating knowledge (Fook and Gardner, 2007). It is of great importance for social workers to get involved in reflective processes by considering what contribution they have in different crisis situations (Ingram & Smith, 2018). Reflection can raise awareness of views and assumptions, but also prejudices, considerations of power, culture and exclusion and can be present in relation between social workers and service users (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Reflexivity has a significant impact on the well-being of social workers (Engstrom, 2017) and service users (Ferguson, 2018). On the other hand, self – awareness is significant for helping and supporting social workers by enabling them to endure and contain different emotions of their clients (Ferguson, 2018).

In order to be successful in their work, social workers need to reflect and recognize how they react to certain situations as well as to the people they help (Kahn, 2005). Consistent self-reflection is necessary to maintain the emotional and professional boundaries that are at the core of social work practice and that serve us well in all aspects of life. Self-reflection encourages personal growth by nurturing insights, learning moments and »*aha*« moments that improve our lives and give us inspiration.

There are numerous studies in disciplines aimed at helping people (medicine, psychology, education) that emphasize the importance of writing and recording reflections for improving mental health and overall well-being (Lepore and Smith, 2002.; Pennebaker, 2004). Some of these studies suggest that reflective writing of helpers contributes to the relief from stress and secondary traumatic experiences of working with people in difficult situations (Lepore and Smith, 2002). Through reflective journals, social workers help themselves integrate the experiences of their beneficiaries, which are often painful and include violence, trauma, injuries and deprivation, in a healthy and safe way. Witnessing these difficult experiences can lead

to burnout, fatigue, depression, or secondary trauma to social workers (Burgund, 2010). Recording these stories contributes to the resilience and empowerment of social workers. Processing stress and difficult emotional conditions, contributes to preventing the risk of illness in social workers and relieves them from the emotional burdens of beneficiaries.

The importance of the reflection in social work practice is connected with its importance for the education of social workers. Some authors (Wong 2004.; Baikie et al., 2013.; Allan 2013.; Giles and Pocket, 2013.; Theobald, Gardner and Long, 2017.; Žegarac and Burgund, 2018) suggest including the reflective thinking as part of curricula of social work education, emphasizing the importance it has for the students' future practice. Teaching reflective practice implies using specific experience to learn about practical situations. The focus is on revealing unconscious values and assumptions, thus making them conscious and possibly changing them in order to fit in with the preferred values (Gardner, 2014). Teaching the reflection can help students to understand how their perceptions about themselves and others are influenced by their history and social context, but also by general history and broader culture (Theobald, Gardner and Long, 2017)

## The grounded theory

The grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is based on the data collected in research from which we learn about the phenomenon that is the subject of research. Furthermore, the theory of a problem or phenomenon is developed inductively, and not on a pre-defined theoretical framework that is tested by research (Creswell, 2007).

The three basic elements of grounded theory are concepts, categories and propositions (Pandit, 1996). The generation and development of concepts, categories and propositions is an interactive process. Grounded theory is not generated a priori and then subsequently tested. It is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory should stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory and then prove it. Rather, »one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge«. (Strauss and Corbin, 1990.:23)

Starting from this theory, the categories in this research were not predefined, but all the identified categories were recognized during the reading of reflective journals. This procedure enabled the identification of topics in the reflective journals of students in a way that is neutral and does not contain prejudices of researchers who are also affected by the pandemic. Grounded theory enables a possibility

of discovering more than one research framework and new and alternate ways of applying existing theories. However, grounded theory research requires certain qualities of the researcher. In particular, confidence, creativity and experience (both of doing research and of the context(s) being researched) are of great benefit.

## Crisis intervention

Crisis could be defined as »an acute disruption of psychological homeostasis in which one's usual coping mechanisms fail and there exists evidence of distress and functional impairment« (Lewis and Roberts, 2001.: 19). Crisis intervention encompasses three distinct periods, namely: before, during, and after the crisis. It should be based on an all-inclusive evaluation of factors that are deemed to be risky and that herald emotional concerns. These include poor psychological well-being prior to a calamity, mourning, injury to oneself or members of one's family, being exposed to deadly situations, panic, separation from family, and low household income (Duan and Zhu, 2020). The situation of COVID-19 crisis was specific because service delivery professionals were the ones who were affected by this crisis as well.

One of the main stages in crisis intervention is to »rapidly establish a relationship«, which social workers need to accomplish when they work with clients. In order to accomplish that, social workers need to be aware of their own feelings and have skills to contain their emotions in the service delivery. One of the ways to increase self-awareness is by reflective journaling.

According to Roberts (2000), »the counselor skilled in crisis intervention can assist in stabilization and intervention to prevent immediate crisis from becoming long-standing problems« (p. 127). In addition, »confidence by social workers in their competence enables clients also to have such confidence so that both social workers and clients believe the helpers are competent to help« (Bisman, 2014:142). As the confidence, awareness and stability are important qualities for social workers, their practice from an early stage is important, hence the reflective diaries can be a useful asset to establish and maintain mentioned qualities.

The pandemic created a state of prolonged crisis; it demanded social work professionals to work in circumstances that required them to engage skills they never learned during their education. Some authors (Taylor and White, 2006.; Harari, 2018.; Afrouz, 2021.) claim that, besides working in crisis, future social workers should be prepared to work in uncertainties. Usually defined as »not knowing for sure what will happen next« (Macdonald and Macdonald, 1999.:17), the concept of uncertainty has been highlighted in the social work literature since 1990s, and it was introduced as a way to explain the constant changes and uncertainties that the profession is facing. Critical social work calls for the need to look at the world through an uncertain lance, adapting our interventions as we obtain further knowledge

and new situations (Afrouz, 2021.). COVID-19 crisis has put forward a notion that social work can no longer resist to deal with sudden changes and uncertainties. Rather, social workers should try and frame uncertainty as an opportunity for flexibility, creativeness and innovation (Fook, 2013), and reflexivity can be an asset in this process of reframing.

## THE AIM, PURPOSE AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

The aim of this research is to present and analyze reflections of students of social policy and social work (SPSW) on the measures for prevention of COVID-19 that were introduced during the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia (RS) from 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 until 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. Research has been conducted in order to get insight in students' reflections toward measures introduced during the state of emergency and on media coverage on these measures.

In order to understand the context of these reflections as well as the reflections on the media coverage of these measures, media reports on the portal of the *Radio Television of Serbia* (RTS), which coincide with the reflections, were used.

The identified contents were broadcasted on the national frequency of the public media service throughout the RS and as such were selected for analysis. The reactions of the students that will be presented and analyzed are singled out as explicit reactions to media coverage and measures introduced by the *Crisis Headquarters* in this period.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to the indicated benefits of reflection for social workers, and in the context of a crisis that can be potentially challenging for the mental health of all, fourth - year SPSW students at the *Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade* were given a task to keep a daily reflective journal during the state of emergency. This task was important as a way of learning how to reflect their feelings in a crisis situation, and, at the same time, it was a form of support to their mental health. Students were tasked to write a free-form reflection each day answering three questions: 1) How do they feel about the overall situation (physically, mentally, socially)? 2) What is their biggest impression of the day? and 3) What are their plans for the future regarding recognized feelings and impressions? It was also emphasized that everything they write is confidential, that their names and surnames, or any other personal information, will not be mentioned anywhere, and that only the teaching staff on the subject will read reflective journals.

This assignment arose as a consequence of the crisis situation and was not planned in the syllabus of the courses. As the research was not planned in advance, identified categories emerged post hoc.

## Sample of the research

The period of the assignment was from March 20 to May 6 2020. A total of 80 students submitted reflective journals. Out of these, six students are male and 74 are female. Sample included all students (N=90) in the fourth year of social policy and social work, who attended courses Counseling in Social Work. As reflective journaling was not obligatory, 10 students resigned this task.

## Procedure

Reflective journals were introduced as a new pre-examination on the course. This task replaced the active participation of students, which was impossible to perform live due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students wrote their reflective journals and delivered them electronically until 15<sup>th</sup> of May (the date of completion of the course, according to the *FPN - UB* calendar for the academic year 2019/2020). The task of keeping a reflective journal was introduced a week after the beginning of the state of emergency and covered the entire period until the abolition of the state of emergency by the *RS Government*. This task was strongly suggested by teachers and it provided credits that could replace active in person participation in the course, but was not mandatory and students could refuse to do it without consequences. Students were informed that only teachers will have an insight in their personal thoughts and reflections and the procedure of reporting the content reflected high ethical standards where all findings presented were coded. The code consisted of gender of the students (female-F, male-M) and the ordinal number of the reflective journal.

It was noticed in the journals that a large number of students reacted to certain news, adopted measures and the manner of media reporting during the state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through reading the reflective journals, teachers on the course recognized that times and contents of students' reactions on the measures coincided with the media reports about these measures, so they considered it important to look into the nature of such reflections.

The paper will present the measures introduced by the *RS Crisis Headquarters*, which were reported by the *RTS* public service<sup>4</sup>, in order to understand the context of students' reflections. Since the decision on the measures was made by the *Government* and the announcements were broadcast at press conferences (on *RTS*, but also on all other stations with a national frequency, and even on some cable programs), the students' reflections were considered both in the context of the adopted measures and in the context of *RTS* media coverage. The influence of other media, such as social networks, was not taken into account in this paper, but the authors acknowledge the influence of social networks in informing the student population (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2021). Selected reflections that will be shown were recorded in the journals in the period mainly from one to three days from the date of broadcasting the given media content and introducing the new measures and the reactions of the students were analyzed in this time period. The exception is the news about the introduction of the state of emergency, which the students reflected on five to eight days from the date when the measure was introduced.

This article follows the criteria for reporting on qualitative research in all the relevant areas including: characteristics of the research team, research design, data collection and ethical standards and data analysis and reporting (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig, 2007.; Ajduković, 2014)

## Data analysis

Collected data was analyzed with qualitative content analyses and there were no predefined themes. All the themes were identified by three independent researchers who came to the themes using thematic analyses. Then the consensus was made and the following topics emerged: »relation towards journal writing«; »perceiving the good aspects of the state of emergency«; »family relations«; »mood variations«; »relation towards food and meal preparation«; »creation of structure«; »development of creativity«; »anxiety«; »state of depression«; »rage and fear«; »students' reflections on the introduction of the measures« and »students' reflections on media reports«. For the purpose of this paper, only the topics that are related to student reflections towards the introduction of measures and media coverage are singled out.

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4 In order to identify to what extent and in what way the students reacted to the adopted measures and media coverage of the introduced measures, this paper will describe the media content from the electronic archive of *RTS*. This service, along with the provincial public media service of *Radio Television of Vojvodina* (RTV), is the only one of its kind and available in all households in RS due to the obligation to pay a fee for public media services.



## REVIEW OF MEDIA CONTENT ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE ELECTRONIC ARCHIVE OF RTS

According to the information obtained from the media reports, the first confirmed case of infection with the COVID-19 virus in the RS was on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (RTS, March 7, 2020). Since then, there has been an increase in the numbers of infected people, which led to the introduction of the state of emergency on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Since its introduction, news of various contents have been broadcasted, urging citizens to be cautious and to fight the pandemic.

During the state of emergency, a number of measures were introduced to fight the pandemic: the most important being the curfew which was imposed during the working days and more strictly during weekends. The curfew was followed by movement restriction (of different length and with different rules) with tightening of measures during the celebration of Easter and Labor Day. After these two holidays, the mitigation of measures upon improvement of epidemiological situation and, eventually, lifting the state of emergency on 6<sup>th</sup> of May happened (RTS, May 4, 2020.).

Media reporting was focused on numbers of cases and the number of the deceased, with a sporadic emphasis on the situations in specific countries, namely in Spain and Italy. Along with the increase in the number of deaths in these countries, media coverage included appeals from the members of the *RS Crisis Headquarters* about the risk that the same scenario would happen in RS if citizens' behavior did not change (RTS, March 28, 2020; RTS, March 29, 2020; RTS, March 31, 2020).

### RESULTS

Students' reflections on the introduction of measures, media coverage of the pandemic and the importance of writing a journal will be presented below, described and illustrated with quotes from the journals.

### Students' reflections on the introduction of the measures

The analysis of reflective journals shows that students reflected on the introduced measures, related to the introduction of the state of emergency, a curfew on weekends and restriction of movement, tightening the measures, celebrating Easter and Labor Day in the emergency conditions, easing of the measures due to the improvement of the epidemiological situation and the abolition of the state of emergency and curfew.

Since students started writing their journals seven days after the introduction of the state of emergency, in the first days of writing the reflective journals, almost everyone commented on the state of emergency and had reactions to this measure. The students' feelings about the introduction of the state of emergency were ambivalent. For some students, it was difficult to define how they felt: *»I don't know how I feel and don't like to see that I lost my routine, my flow of commitments and activities, expelled from usual rhythm of life«* (F41). On the other hand, a number of students felt tension, worry and anxiety: *»I have been feeling anxious and tense for days ... so I'm still trying to come to terms with it«* (F58). On the other hand, some saw this situation as an opportunity to rest, sleep and do activities for which they did not have enough time before, which gave them a sense of satisfaction: *»I used the whole last week to rest and sleep. I enjoyed that vacation...«* (F55).

Students reflected the most to the curfew measures, which were introduced during the state of the emergency, depending on the epidemiological situation. Student reflections show that this measure caused most students difficulty in functioning and they felt anxiety, such as nervousness, panic and lethargy: *»This restriction of movement makes me quite nervous«* (F51). Students reflected on the announcement of the ban on movement and the feelings this announcement provokes: *»The very fact that I will spend the next two days at home without any possibility of going even for a walk makes it difficult for me«* (F70). On the other hand, there were several students who were more acceptive to the introduced measures and considered it necessary for their own safety and the safety of others: *»... it is a little strange that I cannot go outside, but I will endure two more days for my own safety«* (F59).

Regarding the tightening of measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic, students responded by approving this measure, considering it a justified step to preserve the health of all, even though the situation disturbed and frightened them: *»After what happened in Spain and Italy in recent days and weeks, I think that quarantine and 24-hour curfew is a reasonable option«* (F48).

Almost all students had reactions to the measure related to the way big holidays such as Easter and May 1<sup>st</sup> were celebrated as the holidays are usually celebrated with friends and family, and on the other hand students showed understanding for the restriction in order to feel safe.

Easter was celebrated during the state of emergency. Celebrating this holiday in a restricted way caused sadness and displeasure among some students because they were not able to celebrate it with all family members in a traditional way: *»It was especially difficult for me to celebrate one of the greatest Christian holidays in quarantine and isolation«* (F66), but most of the students stated that they spent the holiday in good mood: *»It's Easter, today I was in a good mood. We forgot about the virus and isolation for a moment«* (F69).

*»...On May 1<sup>st</sup> we will officially be closed and honestly maybe that's for the better«* (F40).

Most of the students reacted positively to the news about easing of the measures: *»...We are slowly getting the hope that everything will end soon ...»* (F69). For some students, news on ending the state of the emergency brought new concerns related to adaptation to new circumstances and return to the activities which had been stopped or organized differently due to the state of emergency: *»...In addition to being happy that this is coming to an end, I will miss sleeping and resting all day»* (F67). Students, furthermore, reflected on the importance of continuous adherence to measures after the greater freedom of movement is allowed: *»I heard that the state of emergency will be lifted soon, which made me happy and relieved... However, the danger still exists»* (F68).

Almost all students reflected on the abolition of the state of emergency and curfew. Most of them were delighted by this news and had positive reactions: *»... I feel great relief»* (F65). A significant number of students, besides having positive reactions, wrote about the significance of adhering to measures after lifting the state of emergency: *»I still plan to abide by all the measures»* (F4), while to some students it seemed like the measures are being lifted in a non-planned way: *»I'm glad, but on the other hand it seems to me that it's all happening suddenly»* (F58). The students showed great concern and a certain amount of fear about what the future would look like, *»there is a certain amount of anxiety about what will happen in the future, because everything still seems somewhat uncertain, vague, leaving a dose of confusion»* (F48).

## Students' reflections on media reports

In addition to reflections on the measures introduced by the RS Government and the Crisis Headquarters to prevent the spread of the virus, the reflective journals also highlighted reflections on two topics related to the overall situation during the pandemic. These reflections of the students referred to a large amount of news about the number of deaths and infected persons as a consequence of the COVID-19 virus, as well as to the students' feelings towards following the news which were not related to specific measures.

## Reactions to media reports on numbers of deaths and newly infected persons

While writing reflective journals (from March 15 to May 6), students mostly had reactions to the media coverage on the increase in the numbers of deaths and infections in RS. Those reactions were mostly unpleasant feelings that were caused by watching the news, especially those reporting on the number of diseased per-

sons. *»... it is difficult to hear how many people lose the battle every day«* (F45). Students' reflections on this topic are dominated by fear for other people, both their closest ones - family and friends, and the population in other countries, especially that those with fragile health might be among the huge number of COVID-19 infected *»...Almost 900 people have been diagnosed with coronavirus...this caused panic not only to me and my family, but to all people«* (F54). The students expressed special concern regarding the news about the newly infected in the local areas in which they lived, since most students spent the state of emergency in their hometowns. So much news about the upsetting rise of numbers of infected people caused that students started to avoid such news. *»There are a lot of people who got infected, so I was very sad because I know them all«* (F3). *...It is somehow easier for me when I don't follow those numbers, both locally and globally, because it upsets and frightens me«* (F10).

In addition to the reaction of avoiding the news about the numbers of deaths due to unpleasant feelings they caused, some students noted that they spent more time than ever following the news, which is also a reaction to stress and anxiety. *»I watched TV all day and waited for the news«* (F63).

A large number of students expressed concern about the situation in Italy and Spain, the number of the sick and dead in those countries, as well as the fear that the same situation would happen in RS: *»News about Italy do not inspire hope but fear that Serbia will face such a scenario«* (F14).

## **Ambivalent feelings about following the news**

Reflective journals recorded 50 reflections which referred to the ambivalent feelings of students towards following the news about the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been shown that during the writing of reflective journals, students shifted between pleasant and unpleasant feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic and following media content on this topic. These feelings included anger, fear, sadness, joy, happiness, concern for themselves and others, anxiety and the need to follow the news with varying intensity. In most cases, students reflected fear and worry for themselves and others relating to the news about the newly infected and deceased: *»I occasionally read the news about the situation in our country, which bothered me a bit, so I decided not to read anything related to the virus and the state of emergency«* (F59); and joy and happiness while spending the holidays with their families and with the news about the possibilities to end the state of emergency.

The analysis of reflective journals shows that, mostly at the beginning of the state of emergency, students were interested in more intensive news monitoring, and, as time passed, we can assume that this interest decreased, as students reflected a lower intensity of watching the news. Thus, on the one hand, we see that

students followed press conferences and were interested in the content related to measures and the current epidemiological situation in RS and other countries, and on the other hand, their attitude towards it was negative as such content provoked unpleasant feelings. Students often reflected that they followed the news intensively during the month of March, and, as time passed, they stopped following in that intensity because they were disturbed, they felt bad, but also to protect themselves from unpleasant feelings that the news caused them. *»I stopped following the news every night because I noticed that I became very upset / anxious after watching it«* (F75).

Students generally limited the amount of news they would follow during the day because they recognized how much the news upset them and produced other unpleasant feelings. *»I have determined how much information I like and that it is okay to skip important news...«* (F36).

A small number of students wrote over time about not following the news anymore, focusing on working on themselves and relationships with close people with whom they spent time during the state of emergency: *»I don't follow the news anymore, I rest, train, study and work on myself«* (F76). A small number of students did not follow the news at all while writing reflective journals, stating that the news disturbed them and that they learned about the new measures from friends and family: *»I still do not follow the news; I learn about measures of prohibition or precaution from friends and family...«* (F54).

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of reflective journals shows that students had different feelings during the state of emergency, such as rage, fear, sorrow, anxiety, joy, happiness, worry for themselves and others. The introduction of restrictive measures, especially the ban on movement during weekends and holidays, caused the most reactions among all students. Students reflected the entire range of emotions - from looking for positive aspects on the one hand and dissatisfaction, nervousness to apathy and depression on the other. Restriction of measures and contacts was reflected in every journal on shifting from pleasant to unpleasant feelings which was related to the measures that were introduced during the state of the emergency and to the media coverage. The reasons for such intense reactions can be found in the fact that complete isolation and restriction of movement have been introduced to the already present fear of disease and potential death (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020). This contributed to the increase of fear and led to panic among those students who were reluctant to come into contact with their own emotional states. On the other hand, fear, anxiety and panic attacks, among other things, are manifested in the form of shortness of breath (Gazić, 2020), which could be even more disturbing since the media reported

shortness of breath as one of the symptoms of the virus. Research has shown that isolation results in changes in mental state, depression, apathy, and illness (Arumugam, 2020; Henssler et al., 2020). Lack of contact can cause loneliness as well as affect the perception of stress and insecurity in the future (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020; Torales et al., 2020).

## **Students' reflections on measures and media coverage**

The analysis of students' reflections to the introduction of restrictive measures and the media coverage of them indicates a significant role that content and manner of media reporting had on creating students' reflections. Although students reacted more positively to the announcement of easing the measures, almost all students reflected on the importance of further adherence to measures to prevent the spread of the virus, pointing to fears that measures are being lifted suddenly and expressing uncertainty about what the new situation will bring in the future. The results of this analysis show that, in addition to the fact that students reacted to the introduction of measures, more than 80% of them reacted to the way the media reported on the COVID-19 pandemic. Students reacted to the media reports concerning the number of deaths and newly infected, to the news related to their hometowns to which they returned due to the pandemic. They also reacted to the news related to countries abroad, specifically Spain and Italy following the media's extensive reporting about the situation in these countries. Students' reflections pointed out that they showed concern for other people, and especially for vulnerable groups. This emphatic reaction might be associated with their professional background as well as with their personal traits that made them choose social work in the first place.

On the other hand, most of the students reported a gradual decrease in the amount of information they followed on a daily basis, while some stopped following the news altogether. This reaction of students is in line with the results of other research on news avoidance, where after the initial follow-up, a large percentage of people stopped following the news related to COVID-19 (Fletcher et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Research also shows that the phenomenon of news avoidance is influenced by the ability of individuals to process information transmitted in the media; when the amount of information exceeds a person's ability to process it, it can result in anxiety, feelings of helplessness and loss of control, stress, confusion and frustration (Bawden and Robinson, 2009; Ahmed, 2020; Chen and Chen, 2020). Given the large amount of information that was available in the media during the pandemic, it is possible that students avoided the news because they were overwhelmed, not so much by the amount of information, but by their own (in)ability to

process and manage this information. There are, on the other hand, students who followed the news intensively during the time they were writing their reflective journals. Literature shows that in some people, stressful news provoke even more addiction to following the news, and that might be a traumatic reaction as well (Kim et al., 2020).

A number of students in reflective journals realized their overwhelmingness in the process of writing a reflective journal, so they were able to monitor and recognize their own reactions of fear and anxiety, as well as to see the importance of writing reflective journals for getting to know themselves and their reactions.

## **Reflectiveness and crisis management in social work education**

Recognition and awareness of emotions through reflections and reflective journals writing, bears special importance for the education of social workers and practice of social work (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Teaching future social workers about reflective practice, especially through the critical reflection can help them better understand structural issues (Theobald, Gardner and Long, 2017), and help make them »reflective practitioners who can negotiate their way through the complexity of historical, structural and political factors; organisational, interpersonal and inter-personal factors; considerations of theory through practice; considerations of codified values and ethics; and considerations of the exercise of powers to the point of effective social transformation« (Giles and Pocket, 2013: 218).

In the social work practice, keeping reflective journals can be looked at as a part of work on oneself that contributes to personal and professional development and helps during situations of crisis both to social workers and their clients (Lepore and Smith, 2002.; Engstrom, 2017.; Ferguson, 2018). During situations of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis interventions allow social workers to provide adequate, timely and quality support to clients, in order to prevent long-time consequences of crisis that affects all aspects of life (Roberts, 2000; Dattilio and Freeman, 2011; Bisman, 2014). Significance of the crisis interventions is in reducing the crisis intensity, fast restoration of stability and returning person to a prior level of functioning, which is part of social work practice (Brenda and Ellerbrock, 1995). Crisis interventions are closely connected to working in uncertainty, and COVID-19 pandemic is an example of an unprecedented situation of uncertainty. Social workers often face uncertain situations where it is not easy to answer easily or in a straightforward way. On the contrary, they are often pressured into making fast decisions where it would be better to have time to consider options and possibilities (Afrouz, 2021). This implies the need to consider teaching social workers not only about crisis interventions, but how to work in uncertain situation, where besides



crisis (as a sudden disruption of the person's usual pattern of functioning) there is a situation that is complex, ambiguous and unpredictable, followed by the inconsistent information (Spafford et al., 2007).

This research shows that all actors in society, especially the media, the medical professionals and state authorities, affect people's mental health in the context of the global health crisis. During the state of emergency, there were no official addresses on the preservation of mental health and well-being, but the entire focus was on measures to preserve physical health, which was presented as the most important. Numerous studies (Grover et al., 2020; Herrman, 2001; Robson and Gray, 2007) have shown that mental health is very important for maintaining and improving health and immunity. During the global pandemic, the promotion of mental health has become particularly important, due to the nature of public health measures introduced to prevent the spread of the virus and dramatic changes in the way health care is provided (Goldman et al., 2020). The results of the research raise the question of how the way of media reporting in the situations of global health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be useful for preserving the overall health of people, including not only physical, which was the case this time, but also mental and social well-being. One possibility is to create space for more media coverage of the importance and ways of preserving mental health.

It can be considered that the absence of care about mental health significantly influenced the expressed pessimistic attitude that the contacts and relations in the future will significantly change, which was recorded in the student's reflective journals. It is known that a pessimistic attitude can reduce a person's willingness to face a problem and take action to solve it (Lopes and Cunha, 2008). It is pointed out that hope, optimism and positive expectations about the future have a beneficial effect on mental health (Gallagher and Lopez, 2009), on the ability to cope with the problem (Snyder, 2000) and that the higher the level of hope in a person, the higher his expectations from the future to be more positive are (Snyder and Pulvers, 2001). In this research, a tendency was noticed among students to look for positive sides, such as the justification of tightening measures due to maintaining health, awareness of family members and the importance of collective adherence to measures to improve the situation at the global level. This indicates the human need to give meaning and the belief that by respecting the envisaged measures, the outcomes will be more favourable, which can further contribute to the development of more positive emotions and a better overall condition of the person (Gallagher and Lopez, 2009). The results of this research indicate the importance of relationships for the future social workers, which is in line with the literature on how relationships are important for the social work practice in acknowledging the centrality of relationships for people and the key concepts of attachment, separation, loss, change and resilience (Kennedy, 2019).



It seems that these findings brought to our attention the meaning of practical experiencing in learning by using reflection journals, encouraging students on reflexivity and thinking about feelings and importance of interpersonal relations. Findings have indicated the significance of crisis management as well as students' preparation for work in uncertainty, but also on the media's role on the preservation of mental health during extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## LIMITATIONS

Research, in addition to significant contributions, has some limitations. One of the limitations refers to the sample itself, which speaks in favour of a specific group of students and cannot be generalized to either the general population or the student population as such. Another limitation of this study relates to the sheer extent of media influence. Although it has been shown that there is a connection between media reporting and time and content of reflections in students' journals, it cannot be said with certainty that reactions are only a consequence of media reporting, and especially not only a consequence of RTS public service reporting. The influence of the media, especially social networks, is difficult to measure because it would require a pre-planned study with a clearly set theoretical and methodological framework, which was not the case in this study. Students' reflections on the introduced measures and media reporting during the state of emergency stood out as significant, although this was not primarily the focus of the questions they answered in the reflective journals.

Finally, students' reflections are influenced by their previous experiences, as well as by their general mental health condition, which contributes to having these exact reflections in this situation. Also, one of the limitations is the neutrality of the authors themselves. Having in mind the context, the authors of this research are at the same time participants in experiencing and overcoming the pandemic caused by COVID-19, so the question arises as to what extent their experiences and reflections contributed to the analysis of the findings.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research indicate that the state of emergency was accompanied by a large number of news related to the pandemic both in RS and abroad, and that the exposure of students led to a wide range of feelings that caused disturbing reactions. Special emphasis in the reflective journals was on the relationship with others and how the pandemic influenced maintaining of close relationships with dear people.

Research has shown benefits of continuous usage of reflection and reflective journals in the education of social workers, especially for overcoming situations of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We can conclude that keeping reflective journals encouraged students to be reflective, perceptive and understanding of their own emotions, thoughts and behaviour. It is a recommendation for reflective journals and reflection to be used more in education as part of a learning process, which will provide to future social workers a better adoption of knowledge and skills, and continuous work on themselves. In addition, an emphasis in the education process should be put on working in crisis intervention and uncertainty in order to ensure that future social workers are better prepared to provide quality and timely help to people struck by these circumstances.

Preservation of mental health should be a daily practice at universities. Universities could organize different groups of students, teachers and professionals from practice who deal with the topic of mental health and contribute to its improvement. Additionally, universities could organize a system of an online mental health support to students and teaching staff when circumstances, as they were during COVID-19, make it impossible for the mental health support to be organized online. It is necessary to create opportunities for educating the media on ways of reporting in crisis situations, with a special focus on the importance of the ways of reporting and what consequences the content transmitted through the media has on people's mental health. This task challenges the media to make reporting, on the one hand, neutral, avoiding sensationalism, and, on the other hand, to serve as a medium for conveying credible information to citizens.

As this research was not pre-planned, there was no predefined framework and hence the results gave a fruitful finding in various domains such as: influence of media coverage on mental health and well-being, the use of reflection, reflective learning and crisis intervention and raising awareness about the meaning of social work practice in uncertainty.

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## **PROMIŠLJANJA STUDENATA SOCIJALNE POLITIKE I SOCIJALNOG RADA O UVEDENIM MJERAMA I MEDIJSKOM IZVJEŠTAVANJU TIJEKOM PANDEMIJE COVID-19**

### **SAŽETAK**

*Mjere koje su uvedene zbog pandemije COVID-19 u Srbiji utjecali su na svakodnevni život ljudi. Medijsko izvještavanje tijekom pandemije odigralo je značajnu ulogu u pružanju provjerenih informacija i zaštiti ljudskih prava i dobrobiti. Kako bi se stekao uvid u reakcije studenata socijalnog rada na uvedene mjere i medijsko izvješćivanje o tim mjerama tijekom izvanrednog stanja u Republici Srbiji, u radu se predstavlja analiza refleksivnih dnevnika. Analizirano je osamdeset refleksivnih dnevnika putem kojih su se reakcije studenata na uvedene mjere i na medijsko izvješćivanje povezano s tim mjerama pratile i povezivale s elektronskom arhivom javne medijske usluge novosti Radio Televizije Srbije. Studentska mišljenja o nekoliko uvedenih mjera se prikazuju i analiziraju zajedno s njihovim reakcijama na medijsko izvještavanje o tim mjerama. Rezultati ukazuju na važnu ulogu sadržaja i načina medijskog izvještavanja u stvaranju mišljenja, kao i na važnost korištenja refleksivnih dnevnika u obrazovanju i u očuvanju duševnog zdravlja. Predstavljaju se moguće smjernice za poboljšanje duševnog zdravlja putem medijskog izvještavanja tijekom izvanrednog stanja kao i preporuke za obrazovanje socijalnih radnika.*

**Ključne riječi:** *refleksivni dnevnici; socijalni rad; obrazovanje; medijsko izvještavanje; COVID-19, duševno zdravlje*



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