Real-Time Lived Experience of Social Work Students in Their Field Training during the Coronavirus Crisis: Insights from Photovoice-Based Research

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Abstract

The present paper is based on a photovoice study conducted with sixteen undergraduate social work students in their third year of study, examining their real-time lived experience of their fieldwork training in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The findings of the study, based on an analysis of sixty-six photovoices, indicate four main narratives encapsulating the students’ real-time lived experiences: (i) the challenges of encountering the crisis; (ii) conceptualizing the experience; (iii) coping practices; (iv) perspectives for the future. The findings are discussed in the light of shared traumatic reality theory and transformative learning theory. Following the use of the photovoice methodology, the research conclusions encourage the assimilation of creative and entrepreneurial models of teaching and practice, in order to enable the inclusion of different types of knowledge and life experiences in different learning and research spaces.

Keywords: Coronavirus, photovoice, real-time lived experience, shared traumatic reality, transformative learning

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is a monumental event in human history that has forced drastic changes in lifestyles, ranging from basic forms of
human communication to consumption habits and damage to sources of income (Van Dorn et al., 2020). The crisis has had a similarly devastating impact on the higher education system and on academic institutions (McMurtrie, 2020). Within this new reality, social work educators, social work students and fieldwork supervisor role have all had to face new challenges. Thus, to the basic and well-known challenge of a shared traumatic reality (STR), in which social workers, as well as social work students and educators, are required to manage themselves and their concern for their family whilst concurrently providing professional guidance to the service users in their care (e.g. Dekel and Baum, 2010), new challenges have been added. These include theoretical learning and practical training based on distance learning; the demand for rapid adaptation to new paradigms; the acquisition of new knowledge using technological means and online working methods and personal and professional conduct under high levels of uncertainty (Berger, 2020; Farkas and Romaniuk, 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Papouli et al., 2020).

In the face of rapid historical change and its profound consequences for humanity, and regarding the unique characteristics of the social work profession, it is necessary to examine in real-time lived experience of these help providers. Considering the ability of lived experience-based knowledge (Cahapay, 2020) to shed light on various forms of knowledge, this study seeks to examine the lived experience of undergraduate social work students. To this end, photovoice has been used as a methodology because it allows participants to be highly involved in the knowledge creation process (Wang and Burris, 1997). In this case, they draw from their phenomenological perspective and their daily lived experience of field training, as social work students who will become social work professionals soon.

**Literature review**

**The experiences of social work students in a time of national crisis/disaster**

Given that social work is one of the helping professions, and that the process of training social work students exposes them to traumatic content as well as populations in situations of distress and crisis, it is common to assume that they experience high levels of stress, tension and need (Newell and Nelson-Gardell, 2014; Vungkhanching et al., 2017 Wang and Burris, 1994). However, a specific interest has evolved regarding the capacity of social work students to cope with national crises and disasters, whilst some studies have focused on the post-disaster experience of social work students. For example, in the case of the World Trade Center attack, studies examined the coping patterns of social
work students in the wake of the outrage (e.g. Matthieu et al., 2007), as well as aspects of secondary trauma amongst social work students who had been closely exposed to the site of the attack (Tosone et al., 2003). In the case of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 in the USA, studies have examined resilience factors juxtaposed upon post-traumatic reactions as a coping pattern in the face of exposure to disaster (e.g. Ai et al., 2011), as well as the correlation between the propensity to use drugs and alcohol and post-trauma symptoms (Lemieux et al., 2010; Prost et al., 2016). Contemporary research on the coping patterns of social work students following exposure to disaster situations has examined clinical symptoms, patterns of drug use and adaptive coping mechanisms following the Great Flood of 2016 (Lemieux et al., 2019).

The experience of social work students during a crisis or national disaster is also identified within the context of social work in areas of war and military engagement, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Studies have explored the experience of social work students in Israel living in areas under threat of missile and terrorist attacks to which service users are also exposed (e.g. Baum, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2007). Within this field, the theory of a STR is a helpful conceptual framework: a situation in which the social work student not only assists service users dealing with a traumatic event, but is also exposed to the same reality, is threatened by it, and is sometimes harmed by it (Dekel and Baum, 2010; Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2007).

Social work students’ experiences in the time of the coronavirus pandemic

Several studies have been published following the outbreak of the pandemic in the field of social work (e.g. Farkas and Romaniuk, 2020). These include a small number that have examined more specifically the social work student population. One study, examining the response of 255 social work students in Israel and Russia to the coronavirus, found high rates of fear, symptoms of mental health disorder and an increase in the use of addictive substances (Yehudai et al., 2020). Another study, conducted in Greece, examined the perspective of 550 students in relation to the use of digital technology following the national curfew and the move to working from home. Student reports indicated that the use of digital technology contributed to creating a sense of continuity regarding academic learning and maintaining contact with others; and a sense of self-fulfilment and well-being, demonstrating solidarity towards others and increasing volunteer involvement (Papouli et al., 2020). In a study that examined experiences of remote learning with 122 undergraduate social work students in the USA, it was found that remote learning had a negative impact on interpersonal relationships and quality of
communication—critical values in social work learning fundamentally based on involvement, engagement and a sense of belonging in the classroom (Smoyer et al., 2020). The findings of the study show that in cases where course lecturers incorporated in their online learning practice an effort to engage intimately with their students’ concerns, and were able to show empathy and involvement with the students’ experiences of dealing with the coronavirus crisis, student satisfaction increased (p. 653).

As part of the attempt to examine the experiences of social work students within the new reality dictated by the coronavirus crisis, a more directed effort was made with regard to conceptualizing the experiential nature of social work training, and social work students’ coping with this reality in their practical training, with a view to identifying desirable changes (Bright, 2020, p. 85; Tedam, 2020). In a study conducted in the USA, focusing specifically on the issue of the practical training of social work students, a case study was presented documenting how and when social work students were displaced from their field placements after the onset of the crisis—leading to community needs becoming larger and more severe—an alternative practical training model was applied, namely the action-based field education model (Morris et al., 2020). Based on this model, the social work students initiated the Gifts of Gab project, in order to provide immediate real-time assistance to people in need. Thus, the action-based field education model was an alternative model for practical training in a time of crisis (Morris et al., 2020).

Most studies exploring students’ experiences in the face of a national crisis/disaster have examined coping mechanisms, traumatic effects, and/or growth in the face of exposure to the instigating event. Thus, against this background, the present article examines the real-time lived experience of undergraduate social work students in dealing with the first and immediate phase of the coronavirus crisis in the framework of their practical training.

Method

Photovoice

Photovoice, a methodology developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (Wang and Burris, 1994), is based on three main bodies of knowledge: Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, feminism and visual research. Photovoice serves as a platform for community members to share their lived experiences of dealing with difficulties and problems, together with their unique assets and knowledge, within a dialogical group space that enables participants to feel empowered, identifies community needs and promotes change processes. This group process is designed to document
the issues that emerge in its members’ daily lives, through photography and narrative writing, which systematically collects and builds a database of knowledge and lived experience (Wang and Burris, 1994, 1997). Over the past two decades, photovoice has been applied in various teaching courses in the health and social sciences (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2015; Gutierrez and Wolff, 2017) and specifically in social work education (e.g. Peabody, 2013; Mulder and Dull, 2014; Malka, 2020). Photovoice has been found to contribute to teaching creativity, the development of critical dialogue, and developing students’ reflexive ability. Thus, the applied and theoretical knowledge, accumulated within the social work field (e.g. Malka, 2020; Malka and Langer, 2019; Mulder and Dull, 2014; Yoshihama and Yunomae, 2018), provides the inspiration and justification for using the photovoice methodology in this study.

Research context and procedure

Sixteen third-year undergraduate social work students from the School of Social Work at Sapir College participated in the study. Sapir College is located in the periphery of Israel, in the south of the country. The School of Social Work has about 400 students, from a cross-section of communities in the region and from different communities and cities in other parts of Israel. The participants were part of a practical training seminar, led by the author of the article, whose area of expertise is in photovoice-based research projects. The training seminar is a dedicated course, during which students deal with dilemmas from practical training in the field, as well as issues related to developing their professional identity as future social workers.

At the beginning of the second semester of the Israeli academic year, following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the seminar was shifted to online sessions and the photovoice became a major methodology in the seminar group work. First, the methodology was orientated, with the theoretical, practical and ethical principles presented to the students. Each student was then asked to prepare four photovoices over the course of the semester, one per three weeks, relating to the topic ‘My lived-experience of the encounter with the Corona crisis as a third-year student in practical training’.

Thus, students were instructed to take a picture reflecting their lived experience in the face of the crisis; and to write an accompanying narrative, describing this experience with reference to the various images presented in the picture; insights, successes, dilemmas, meanings given to different events and the difficulties and complexities that they encountered. At the beginning of the process, and for the sake of experimentation, the photovoice of the whole group was presented to the students in the format of a ‘virtual exhibition in Zoom’. On this basis, a group
discussion and dialogue about the experience were created. Later in the semester, four to six selected photovoices were presented, which then served as the basis for the group work. This group work made it possible to learn from the experiences of the students who presented their photovoices, and to create a group discussion in which it was possible to conceptualize the different experiences, to normalize them, to think of ways of action, and to formulate new ideas.

Data collection and analysis

Between 17 March 2020 and 18 June 2020, sixty-six photovoices ($N = 66$) were collected. This database was analysed in line with categorical content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), in four stages: (i) holistic reading of the database was conducted, to develop an initial impression of the materials and (ii) recurring themes were identified and marked. These themes included professional dilemmas, emotions (e.g. helplessness and uncertainty), a sense of time, difficulties and successful actions; (iii) the various themes were grouped into twelve categories (e.g. avoidant, adaptive coping style; old knowledge, new knowledge, emerging knowledge); and (iv) the categories identified were reduced to four main narratives about the participants’ lived experiences (Table 1).

The process of analysing and extracting the narratives was presented to the students. The feedback received made it possible to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Shenton, 2004) and facilitated triangulation between sources. The findings were subsequently presented at an international online conference, to lecturers who have taught similar courses and were able to compare the present effort with the relevant literature.

Ethical considerations

The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work at Sapir College. All the sixteen students who

| Type of narratives                                      | The frequency of the narrative in the sample, $N$ (%) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| (a) The coronavirus crisis as a new challenge          | 24 (36.37)                                           |
| (b) Conceptualizing the process of facing the coronavirus crisis | 14 (21.20)                                          |
| (c) Coping practices with the coronavirus crisis       | 14 (24.24)                                           |
| (d) Perspectives for the future                       | 14 (21.24)                                           |
| Total                                                  | 66 (100)                                             |
took the course signed an informed consent form regarding the use of images and narratives for research purposes. The photographs were taken with strict adherence to the ethics of photography, preserving the anonymity of the participants or others who were photographed.

**Findings**

The findings are organized into four narratives about the students’ experiences of dealing with the coronavirus crisis as part of their practical training (Tables 1 and 2). The four narratives are presented below in chronological order, each presented unedited, as prepared by the students who participated in the study.

**The coronavirus crisis as a new challenge**

The first narrative featured as a central narrative in twenty-four (36.36 per cent) of the photovoice (Table 1), and for all the study participants (Table 2). This narrative represents the experience of encountering the drastic changes imposed on the public following the outbreak of the pandemic and dealing with these changes within the role of a social work student undertaking practical training.

Example 1 (Or): Uncertainty within daily and weekly schedules (Figure 1)

Voice (narrative): I photographed my computer screen with an appointment diary, as symbolizing my central coping with the Coronavirus. One of my challenges has been scheduling appointments with service users. Before the Coronavirus, it was clear to me when I was in field-work placement: the time and place were fixed. Today the situation is different. Almost any time of the day can be a meeting time, and anywhere inside the house. I have no external demarcation boundaries for place and time, and I live in uncertainty. For example, one of the service users sent a message to me at night, writing that “it is difficult for me and I must share it with you” .. or another person, who changed the date of the meeting at the last minute. Should I allow this? … I find

| Type of narratives                                      | Students with at least one photovoice which included this type of narrative as main, N (%) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (a) The coronavirus crisis as a new challenge          | 16 (100)                                                                                 |
| (b) Conceptualizing the process of facing the coronavirus crisis | 12 (75)                                                                                 |
| (c) Coping practices with the coronavirus crisis       | 11 (68.75)                                                                               |
| (d) Perspectives for the future                       | 12 (75)                                                                                 |
myself allowing everything the service users want .. evening calls, morning calls .. changing call times .. “I’m at home anyway and free to help, so why not?” This is the feeling I walk around with, that any given moment can be a meeting time.

Example 2 (Don): It’s heavy for us (Figure 2)

Voice (narrative): I took the picture at my parents’ house in northern Israel, where I am staying after leaving my student apartment near the college following the closure and the transition to an online routine. I fill my free time working with weights. I chose to photograph the weights because they symbolize the heavy fears that have arisen in me during this period. It’s not only about the situation of the whole world and the country, and the sense of urgency, but also the great responsibility I feel toward the service users whom I worked with during
the practical training. Just as I lift and lower weights, so too the feeling of a heavy weight on my back goes up and down. There are days when I manage to keep in touch with them and hear things that calm me down, and there are days that I am left frustrated and worried.

Or’s description contains elements that are consistent with the theory of STR, such as a tendency to take responsibility, as well as the loss of personal boundaries; within the description, one can discern how the element of stress lies (Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2007, p. 529) alongside the element of opportunity for professional growth (Dekel and Baum, 2010, p. 1933). The weights that Don exercises with at home are apparently a kind of support and a way of relieving stress in the face of dealing with the coronavirus crisis. They give him the creative inspiration to express his sense of responsibility towards service users, which is also a characteristic feature of a STR (Dekel and Baum, 2010, p. 1934). Thus, these two illustrations show how this narrative incorporates within it the characteristics of the encounter with the coronavirus as a new challenge facing students: as ordinary citizens, as well as people in the process of becoming social workers, who are required to communicate with service users as part of their practical training.

The two representative examples above illustrate how, in the face of a reality in which familiar and well-known boundaries have been undermined, students ‘lend’ themselves, their schedules and their private home to provide an online solution for their service users. At the same time, a sense of responsibility surrounds the students: they are expected not only to take care of themselves, but also to take care of the service users also facing the consequences of the crisis, as described in Don’s example. Indeed, other students in the group described significant concerns for different populations in their care, including battered women, the elderly and adolescents with autism, along with the sense of helplessness created, in part, by the barriers to connecting with service users online to provide appropriate assistance.

Conceptualizing the process of facing the coronavirus crisis

The frequency of the second narrative was 21.24 per cent (Table 1) and with 12 (75 per cent) of the participants (Table 2). This narrative reflects an attempt to examine the new reality through existing knowledge and a (renewed) understanding of the role that the social work profession can play in a time of crisis.

Example 3 (Hila): Breaking point—coronavirus as crisis coping situation (Figure 3)

Voice (narrative): This week I went for a run in a nature reserve near my house. Amidst all the greenery and blooming flowers, I came across a tree that had been broken during the storms of last winter, and it filled
me with a deep sense of sadness. The broken tree symbolizes the situation of a family that I am working with in my practical training. This week I spoke with the father of the family who said, ‘I try but feel that I am about to break down . . .’ I realized that something in practical training in the age of Corona, leaves me with a sense of lack, and forces me to deal with acute feelings of loss that I know from other worlds in my life. It led me to think about the meaning of the word’s ‘fracture’ and ‘crisis’ as well as coping in a time of crisis.

Example 4 (Dor): Coping and defense mechanisms (Figure 4)

Voice (narrative): I photographed the liquid soap in the bathroom because it symbolizes the way the Corona virus has taken over our lives. This soap is used by us like never before, and I never imagined I would have to wash my hands so many times. Who would have thought that our hands could endanger our lives? This led me to think that as a social worker I should be creative and make judicious use of instructions such as hand washing as part of a process of adapting to a new situation. We must find the right way to fulfill the instructions to protect us and our patients—spiritual, emotional, or physical protection—to prevent a catastrophe that is greater.

The examples presented above illustrate how the knowledge that students have acquired during their studies is embodied in a narrative that represents an attempt to conceptualize the experience of facing the coronavirus crisis. For example, Dana engages with a body of knowledge that is directed towards coping in a time of crisis, the emotions that accompany this and the understanding that a crisis can be the basis for
growth. Moreover, Dana links her observation of service users coping to a memory of a traumatic crisis that she had experienced herself. This observation prompted a class discussion about the distinction between empathy and identification with the patient.

In the second example, Oren symbolized the ideas of defense mechanisms and their role in a time of crisis, when the anxiety levels of those exposed to trauma increase.

Moreover, it seems that following the encounter with the coronavirus as an extraordinary event, as described in an earlier narrative, students sought to frame the event within existing professional schemas and patterns; this move, in itself, is a step within a learning process shaped by reflexive observation (Schön, 1987; Vinjamuri et al., 2017). Dana’s example is adapted to the idea of the ‘wounded healer’ (White, 2000), the wounds manifesting during a meeting with service consumers. Don, on the other hand, looks for ideas from ego psychology, in order to assert how important, it is for the social worker to help the patient develop flexible and adaptive defenses (Goldstein, 1995).

In other examples that came up in the group, students referred to concepts from different bodies of knowledge, such as, resistance to change in the new situation or a model of mourning stages, both as ways of conceptualizing the process that they were going through.
Coping practices with the coronavirus crisis

The frequency of the third narrative was 21.24 per cent (Table 1) and with 11 (68.75 per cent) of the participants (Table 2). This narrative reflects coping practices adopted by students in order to face the new situation as a way of adopting a more positive thinking style, and in finding methods and actions tailored to the challenge of keeping in touch with service users.

Example 5 (Tina): To think out of the box (Figure 5)

Voice (Narrative): Following the general closure, we were notified that we were to stop seeing service users, and that we were to maintain contact with them via telephone or Zoom. My immediate feeling was that there was no point in having such a relationship, and that I did not know how to do it. When I thought about it, I saw the box in my room and photographed it. The picture is meant to illustrate how challenging the experience of a social worker student in the shadow of the Corona crisis is, and the understanding that it requires me to deviate from the accepted rules and settings. I realized that during this time, one needs to think creatively, outside the box, and find ways how to continue the therapeutic relationship despite the difficulties.

Example 6 (Revital): Positive conditioning—candy makes me feel good (Figure 6)

Voice (narrative): The photo presents a wooden table on which a telephone, a laptop, study notebooks, and some candy are placed. The photo deals with the question, how can I manage a daily task schedule
in the best and most enjoyable way during the Corona crisis? Anything that can do me good, body or soul. I realized that the more I can enjoy doing this time, the more I will have available time, calmness, and direction in the conversations with the service users that are so important in order for me to be able to support them during this complex time.

These examples symbolize how, as part of the narrative of coping with the coronavirus crisis, students demonstrated an independent and original part of the coping process. This step is consistent with the notion of transformative learning: even whilst dealing with a dilemma, difficulty or dissonance arising from the coronavirus crisis, there is room for new forms of thinking and for new knowledge (Mezirow, 2012). Thus, in the first example, Sharona points to the basic understanding that with the change in normal circumstances, new and adapted ideas are needed. Accordingly, Sharona ‘freezes’ through photography a specific pedagogical moment in the learning process (Malka, 2020), expressing her phenomenological point of view through creative–artistic means (Huss, 2012), which allows for expressing the idea of a new pattern of thinking. Indeed, with regard to a new form of thought and practice, Revital’s
photovoice presents a practice of coping that illustrates the pressure of the ‘professional self’: when the student is required to manage oneself from within the home, the boundaries between private and professional time become fluid.

This narrative represents the students’ agency and creativity, which were reflected in the group discussion and reminded the students of the basic idea that every person has strengths and assets, which are manifested in times of crisis, difficulty, and distress. Students have used photovoice to report on new practices: talking to service consumers whilst walking, arranging the room or other space inside the home as a ‘treatment room’, or guiding a treatment group online, for example.

Perspectives for the future

The frequency of the fourth narrative was 21.24 per cent (Table 1) and with 12 (75 per cent) participants (Table 2). This narrative embodied a preoccupation with ‘the day after’, in relation to the understanding that reality must continue for students at the end of the process of becoming professionals.

Example 7 (Talia): Stopwatch (Figure 7)

Voice (narrative): The picture illustrates that time is running out, toward the end of the training and studies of the first degree. The clenched fist symbolizes the urgency of time; the path beyond the hand symbolizes the path and process we have gone through so far, and the path that is still to be expected in the future. Toward the end, it is time to pinpoint the goals of the intervention, and to summarize the past year, with the understanding that in the short time left, there are more things that need to be done before we become social workers.

Example 8 (Eli): Hey, I did not get to see! (Figure 8)

Voice (narrative): The photo was taken during a trip in a rural and verdant area, in the evening, at sunset. But it is difficult to see the view outside, because the pace of the journey did not allow for the photo to be fully captured. The picture tells the story of my experience of parting from the degree (BSW). Everything passes so quickly. I have a hard time stopping to reflect and summarize, and I also fail to look ahead and make decisions.

Example 9 (Revital) I’m going my own way (Figure 9)

Voice (narrative): The chair in the picture symbolizes my school bench over the past three years; the laptop symbolizes the knowledge I have gained; and the sprout that is growing out of the piece of earth symbolizes the new way I am going, as student who is becoming a social worker. I am divided between pride and satisfaction in my accomplishments, and fear of the unknown and doubts about my abilities. Completing my undergraduate degree, in the shadow of the
Figure 7: Photographed by Talia, 3 May 2020.

Figure 8: Photographed by Eli, 30 May 2020.
Coronavirus crisis, created a feeling that I had not been able to close things off as I had hoped. Yet, alongside the sense of missing out, the crisis gave me time and opportunity for introspection, which helped me understand what was important for me and put things into proportion.

The three examples above illustrate the students’ preoccupation with the price they were obliged to pay, thanks to the coronavirus crisis, in relation to a ‘normal’ graduation from social work training, and on the other hand, their ability to hold on to hope for the future. Talia describes the dimension of time and the aspiration of the students—probably after they have become accustomed to the crisis—to make the best of the time left before the completion of their studies for a first degree in social work. Eli also refers to the dimension of time, and the feeling that things have passed too quickly for her, so much so that some impressions are blurred, like the view through the window of the speeding car. Finally, Revital presents a complex point of view, combining satisfaction and pride in relation to the achievements she has secured, but also a sense of failure in the face of unfulfilled goals, but all with a sense of hope in relation to her professional future.

The process described in the three examples illustrates how the development of a professional identity embodies the ability to recognize the imperfect aspects of the experience, and to ascribe professional
meanings to the loss, as part of a more integrative conception of acceptance with loss—similar to the process of dealing with different stages of grief (Kessler, 2019). Thus, this narrative reflects the ability of students to establish a meaningful connection with the future to come, in a way that can teach about the ability of reflexive observation, embodying within it the beginnings of a process of deriving insights and learning from experience.

Discussion

This study examined the real-time lived experience of social work students in practical training to become social workers during the initial phase of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The findings of the study point to four main narratives regarding the students’ lived experiences. Regarding the first narrative, it is not surprising to find that the theory of STR (e.g. Dekel and Baum, 2010) succinctly captures this narrative, in terms of dealing with coronavirus as a new challenge. Indeed, this narrative embodies within it the different reactions of students in the face of the characteristics of their new reality: a traumatic new reality that they share with service users, its defining characteristics including uncertainty, the undermining of stability and existing order, changes in work habits and the blurring of the boundaries between the domestic and professional spheres. As in previous studies, the students’ responses indicate the difficulties that they have encountered, as part of the process of becoming professionals, in accommodating this dual role (e.g. Dekel and Baum, 2010, pp. 1935–6) — simultaneously managing their own coping with the crisis, and the assistance and support they expected to provide to the service users (Baum, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2007; Tosone et al., 2003). Indeed, responses, such as a sense of helplessness, lack of control over the situation and a heavy sense of responsibility, have all been described in the literature as consistent with the status of social work students and the impact of their lack of experience on mechanisms of adaptation to a STR (Baum, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2007; Tosone et al., 2003).

However, even though STR theory also points to the positive aspects of students’ coping with the traumatic reality, such as professional growth (Dekel and Baum, 2010), or volunteering as a way of mitigating stress (Plummer et al., 2008), it seems that in order to explain the set of narratives, a complementary theoretical framework to the STR theory is required. Thus, consistently, the current study sought to document the students’ lived experience using a methodology that gives to the students the status of an active actor or learner possessing agency (Wang and Burris, 1997). The narratives thus produced strongly suggest a theory
that can consider notions of active learning and change occurring in the face of a crisis or extreme event.

Thus, the students’ lived experiences in the face of a real-time crisis can also be considered in the light of Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), which is ‘[t]he process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action’ (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). According to TLT, transformative learning occurs in a situation where the balance and stability that a person feels in relation to reality, and the person’s understanding of the events within it, have been disturbed, usually in the presence of a crisis event (Mezirow, 2012). According to TLT, the first narrative, which embodies the experience of the initial encounter with the coronavirus crisis, can be explained as a ‘disorienting dilemma’ (or an unsettling experience), which is the first stage of TLT (Mezirow, 2009). At this stage, events unfolding in the face of the crisis, such as the loss of private boundaries and the ambiguities of one’s new daily schedule (Example 1), do not correspond with the previous meaning structure to which the participants were accustomed as social work students. These experiences have the potential to undermine them. The heavy responsibility described in Don’s example (Example 2), for instance, also reflects the challenge to the ordinary and existing structure of perceptions of reality.

The second narrative in the findings, which reflects the students’ conceptualization of the situation, is consistent with the second and third components of TLT that is critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 2009). Within this narrative, the newly acquired ability of the students is expressed as part of their professional identity of becoming social workers, in the form of a capacity for reflexivity (Vinjamuri et al., 2017), and, in relation to lived-experience in real-time, reflection in action (Schön, 1987). This can be seen in Dor’s narrative (Example 4). The symbolization that he confers onto the soap bottle is part of an attempt to critically observe the situation, and to conceptualize it and the rational discussion which is taking place with Dor’s imagined audience for his photovoice—that is his classmates. It is important to note that since this is real-time documentation, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether this narrative is indeed the creation of entirely new knowledge, as reflected in TLT (Mezirow, 2009). However, clues pointing to the development of new perceptions and views (even comparable to those of the first narrative) can be found in the third narrative, which is consistent with the fourth stage of TLT that is the stage of action.

Thus, the third narrative identified in this study, which deals with the practices that the students describe as their response to the crisis, documents within it an action embodying a new conceptualization of the situation. Tina’s narrative (Example 5) illustrates the general idea of adopting a new thinking framework (thinking outside the box); Revital’s
example (Example 6) explores a framework she developed in order to organize her professional self in the light of the uncertainty described in the first narrative.

Indeed, the nature of the action of the practices in these narratives carries within them, in line with TLT’s claim, reflexive, inclusive and integrative aspects of the experience (Mezirow, 1997), such that it can be seen as not merely an automatic response. Moreover, it seems that when referring to the fourth narrative, which deals with the idea of the future perspective, these aspects are also accentuated in the way that the students discuss their professional self in relation to the future to come. This can be seen with Revital (Example 9), and her description of a sense of growth emerging from difficulty and frustration. Similarly, it can be seen with Eli (Example 8), through the understanding that it will take time for the fog of uncertainty to dissipate; eventually, the picture will become clear and then it will be possible to digest and process what has happened.

This study has several limitations. First, the study lacks the students’ retrospective perspective from post-crisis time points. Secondly, it should be kept in mind that this is a specific group of social work students, in the last semester of their training. The study thus lacks the perspective of students at other stages of their training. Finally, because the study was conducted ad hoc, as part of an academic course, the conditions did not allow for a photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) exhibition, which would have facilitated further learning through the expressed impressions of viewers and visitors to such an exhibition.

However, following the findings of this study, it is advisable to examine in further research the application of the photovoice methodology as a unique tool for capturing impressions of dealing with a crisis in real time, incorporating the principles expressed in the findings, that is the student’s perceptions of active learning, support, and shared learning from the experience.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the active role of social work students in the face of an encounter with a profound and multifaceted crisis such as the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The study suggests that the two theories, STR and TLT, offer an interpretive framework for students’ capacities for coping with and during a crisis. However, whilst STR is more focused on trauma response patterns, TLT is more focused on the student’s ability to explore the experience, learn from it, and assimilate it as new knowledge within the body of knowledge already acquired.

The conclusions of this article join the call to assimilate into the learning and training processes for social work students (as well as for social
workers themselves) creative–experiential and reflective learning approaches (e.g. Malka, 2020; Archer-Kuhn, 2020; Baum, 2004; Rodham et al., 2020), which enable real-time processing and learning, and within which the professional/student, as a learner, researcher and active actor, has the ability to draw from existing knowledge, as well as creating new knowledge, in dealing with a crisis. The research process as well as its findings points to the uniqueness of the photovoice methodology in the implementation of creative and entrepreneurial models of teaching and practice, which allows the inclusion of different types of knowledge and life experiences.

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