

2014-09-30

Understanding Workplace Experiences of First-Year Canadian Social Workers: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

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Newberry-Koroluk, A. M. (2014). Understanding Workplace Experiences of First-Year Canadian Social Workers: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study (Doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>. doi:10.11575/PRISM/28580
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Understanding Workplace Experiences of First-Year Canadian Social Workers: A Hermeneutic
Phenomenological Study

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 2014

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Abstract

There is limited global research addressing the experiences of first-year social workers in general, and a dearth of scholarship specific to the Canadian context. In 2012–2013, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine early-career (0.6–3.7 years post-Bachelor of Social Work/BSW), young adult (aged 23.9–32.9) social workers in Alberta, Canada to answer the question: how do young adult, early-career Alberta social workers understand subjective feelings towards their work experiences in their first year of practice following completion of the BSW? My research method was hermeneutic phenomenology, an interpretive approach to understanding the meaning of lived experiences. Symbolic interactionism provided the theoretical foundation for my research, facilitating dual attention to structural factors and the dynamics of individual interpretation and agency. My findings relate to the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year social workers; institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the social work role; first-year social workers' fears of committing a cataclysmic error in practice; the meaning of encountering one's own privilege and marginalization; and disappointments in early practice and individual narratives of transformation and idealism renegotiated. The literature review and findings suggest that three interconnected areas influence the subjective experiences of new social workers: institutional structures, social positionality, and lived experience. Through the interplay of these three areas, subjective workplace experiences are made understandable and meaningful to early-career social workers. From a broad inter-disciplinary perspective, this work is a substantial contribution to scholarship on gender relations and the workplace. Implications for social work education include challenging internalized oppression that reflects gendered norms in caregiving work; teaching multiple ways of evaluating practice rather than relying exclusively on post-positivist

epistemologies and methodologies; encouraging reflexivity about practitioner social location; and disrupting narratives that presuppose a single “social work perspective” operating in agencies. In the realm of social work practice, applications include actively challenging the devaluation of young women workers and advocating for better working conditions. Future research in social work could explore gender in the early-career period across the life course and gender identity continuum.

Acknowledgments

Many people have supported my progress throughout the PhD. I wish to offer my particular appreciation to:

- My supervisor **Dr. John Graham**, for his ongoing intellectual and pragmatic assistance throughout all stages of my graduate education. His responsiveness, commitment to a wide intellectual foundation, skill at posing challenging questions, and strategic advice facilitated my development as a researcher and scholar and the timely completion of this thesis.
- **Dr. David Nicholas**, for assuming the role of co-supervisor when Dr. John Graham transferred to Florida Atlantic University. Your willingness to contribute to my academic development is very appreciated.
- My committed and supportive supervisory committee, including **Dr. Nancy Moules and Dr. David Este**. Thank you to Dr. Nancy Moules, in particular, for introducing me to the rich tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, including its history, philosophy, and practice, as well as expert assistance in structuring the thesis. Thank you to Dr. David Este, in particular, for significant input into the development of my research proposal and for his support throughout my graduate education.
- My thesis committee: **Dr. Kent Donlevy** (internal external), **Dr. Don Fuchs** (external), and **Dr. Ellen Perrault** (neutral chair).
- My candidacy committee: **Dr. David Nicholas** (internal-external), **Dr. Gillian Ranson** (external), and **Dr. Jennifer Hewson** (neutral chair). Thank you to **Dr. Gillian Ranson** for introducing me to the sociology of gender relations and helping me to connect the theory to my topic.

- **The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** and the **Faculty of Social Work** for their financial support.
- The **administrative staff** in the University of Calgary and the Faculty of Social Work for facilitating many administrative requirements of my program.
- My professors in the Faculty of Social Work not already mentioned: **Dan Wulff, Leslie Tutty, and Christine Walsh.**
- **Dr. Alison MacDonald** for sharing her expertise on issues of professional regulation.
- My **participants**, for the generous sharing of their time, insights, and experiences, and for the passion and energy they bring to their early-career practice.
- My **family** for their ongoing emotional, material, intellectual, and moral support. My husband **Doug Koroluk** for his ongoing encouragement, reading and commenting on drafts, sense of humour, and for his full and unwavering commitment to my academic/occupational/life goals. My mother **Janet McIntosh** for sparking my interest in first-year social workers, many long conversations about my topic, and continually making sure I stayed on top of my “grand project.” My father **Alan Newberry** for continual encouragement and sharing a sense of humour about the PhD process and academic life. My sister **Christina Newberry** for her support, editing of papers, and her punctilious attention to all my commas. My childhood friends **Nicole Shih** and **Amanda Krebs** for their unwavering support and encouragement.
- **Dan Ramsden**, who helped me through a difficult season of my life, and believed that I would have a hopeful and productive future.

- Finally, my **PhD cohort** (within both the faculty and the university), without whom I could not have sustained my energies long enough to complete this work. In particular, **Cari Gulbrandsen, Rita Dhungel Adhikari, and Dr. Rita Yembilah Barre**. Special thanks to **Cari Gulbrandsen** for reading and commenting on my findings chapters, and for getting me thinking more deeply about issues of socioeconomic class.

Dedication

*To all the first-year social workers that enter the field with passion and idealism, and
those they serve.*

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Chapter One: Introduction

The transition in status of a ‘new graduate social worker’ to a ‘social worker with one year’s experience’ is probably one of the most significant experiences occurring in a social worker’s career. (Pockett, 1987, p. 38)

In this chapter, I provide the background and rationale for my research; introduce the research question and methodology; discuss my role as the researcher; define social work; and provide an overview of the organization of the thesis.

Background and Rationale

Every profession must develop methods to support the entry of its newest members, and social work is no exception. Although there is limited scholarship exploring the experiences of new social workers in Canada, the existing research from other countries suggests that the first year of social work practice can be emotionally distressing for the new worker. Physical and emotional fatigue in new social workers has been recognized since the 1960s (Wasserman, 1970). Navigating the transition from academic social work to real practice is a challenge, and poor organizational supports can lead to unhappiness at work and a reduced commitment to continuing within the organization (Jack & Donnellan, 2009). The first year of social work practice has been conceptualized as a “baptism by fire” (Bates et al., 2010, p. 152). Human resources research has found a negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and age and years in the field, suggesting that younger and newer workers may be more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion than their older and more experienced peers (Brewer & Shapard, 2004). The allied disciplines of nursing and teaching have high attrition rates among their early-career

workers (Halfer & Graf, 2006; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), but social work researchers have not quantified this loss. Importantly, the existing literature suggests that new social workers may experience significant challenges during their first year of practice.

Social work is a highly situated human endeavour, influenced by the socio-political contexts of the institutions, communities, and nations in which it is practiced, as well as by changing global dynamics. The extant literature examining the experiences of first-year social workers is substantively focused on the social worker/agency nexus and offers somewhat narrow attention to larger contexts of social service delivery and professional issues in social work. Overall, there is a relative neglect of wider societal and socio-political contexts of practice. Furthermore, in general only circumscribed consideration of first-year social workers' active interpretations and responses to their experiences emerges in the prevailing scholarship. The small body of research focusing on the subjective experiences of new social workers (a lesser focus than assessment of readiness for practice and induction schemes) predominantly comprises quantitative methodologies, with a smaller number of qualitative and mixed-methods designs. Additionally, much of the research emerged from the particular practice context of the United Kingdom, which while informing a Canadian research agenda, cannot be applied uncritically to Canada's different social work context.

Social work educators and administrators need to understand the factors that influence the professional adjustment and well-being of new social workers in order to prepare students and new graduates for sustainable and healthy social work careers. Promoting practices that lead to increased social worker tenure within organizations and within the profession will increase the quality of services being provided to clients in Canada through increased continuity of services. As Canada and other Western countries face the retirement of the baby-boom generation,

preparations for initiating and supporting a new generation of social workers to replace retiring workers take on greater urgency (Dohm, 2000). Providing support to social workers in the front-line will contribute to a competent and sustainable workforce, able to meet the needs of the clients of health and social service organizations today and in the future. At present, there is a limited body of literature on the experiences of first-year social workers generally, and a paucity of literature on Canadian first-year social workers specifically.

Research Question and Methodology

The purpose informing my thesis is to understand the experiences of first-year social workers in a Canadian context, and to make educational and practice recommendations to improve social worker well being in early practice. My research question is: how do young adult, early-career Alberta social workers understand subjective feelings towards their work experiences in their first year of practice following completion of the BSW? Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine early-career (0.6–3.7 years post-BSW), young adult (aged 23.9–32.9) social workers in the Calgary, Alberta area. The research methodology and design are presented in-depth in Chapter Three.

Role of Researcher

My interest in the experiences of first-year social workers was influenced by my own experiences as a social work supervisor and through reflection on my own first-year experiences. In hermeneutic phenomenology, researcher subjectivity is central to the method and bracketing (temporarily suspending pre-conceptions) is not used. Therefore I use the active voice throughout my thesis, and reflect further on my subjectivity in the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion chapters. A central component of researcher subjectivity in

hermeneutic phenomenology is the hermeneutic circle, which involves the ways in which knowledge is mediated both by pre-conceptions and by new experience. I offer a short meditation on the hermeneutic circle and my experience with this thesis research in the final chapter (Chapter Ten).

Definition of Social Work

Social work involves the application of helping skills, knowledge, and humanitarian and democratic values in support of the well being of individuals, communities, and the larger global society. Professional acceptance of a shared and explicit value base facilitates social workers' activism for social justice. Social justice involves respect for human rights and the fundamental dignity of human persons, as well as fair distribution of, and access to, the material and social resources required for full expression of human potential.

The functions and practice setting of social work are diverse, with social workers employed in government programs, private practice, not-for-profit agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and private sector companies (Carniol, 1995; International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). Social workers respond to a variety of social needs at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and employ a range of intervention techniques across settings (e.g., policy work, counselling, administration of social services, etc.) (Connolly & Harms, 2012). The International Federation of Social Workers (2000) defined social work in the following way:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.

Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the

points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (para. 1)

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2012) endorsed a similar definition of social work:

Social work is a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being. It aims to help people develop their skills and their ability to use their own resources and those of the community to resolve problems. Social work is concerned with individual and personal problems but also with broader social issues such as poverty, unemployment and domestic violence.

Human rights and social justice are the philosophical underpinnings of social work practice. The uniqueness of social work practice is in the blend of some particular values, knowledge and skills, including the use of relationship as the basis of all interventions and respect for the client's choice and involvement. (para. 1–2)

While both the international and the Canadian definitions describe social work as concerned with human well-being at the nexus of person and environment, as well as human rights and social justice, the International Federation of Social Workers (2000) definition also includes a focus on social change.

The title “social worker” is legally protected in most Canadian provinces, and requires completion of an accredited social work program (usually a Bachelor or Master of Social Work, however a diploma is acceptable in Alberta), commitment to adhere to an ethical code and standards of practice, and registration with the appropriate provincial regulatory body (Canada's three territories do not have social work regulators). This legal title protection does not limit who can provide social services to the public, but it does limit who can use the title of social

worker, and in some provinces (Alberta excepted) limits the practice of social work to registered social workers. Some scholars and practitioners have challenged exclusive claim to the title by those who qualify under these terms and have argued that it is elitist and self-serving to create hierarchies among those who are involved in the human and social services; however, the need for public protection and accountability are usually recognized alongside these possibilities in the debate about title protection, especially given the vulnerability of persons receiving services (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Social workers work alongside other human services professionals and workers, for example: physicians, lawyers, teachers, and unregulated social services providers (e.g., outreach workers, substance use counsellors, caseworkers, etc.).

Organization of Thesis

In Chapter Two, I establish the context for social work in Alberta, Canada (including female predominance in social work and gender relations in the profession, the influence of socio-political factors on practice, and our unique provincial and national contexts). I then present a comprehensive review of the extant literature focusing on first-year social workers and novice workers in allied disciplines, and substantiate the need for further Canadian research in this area. I also present symbolic interactionism as an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of new social workers.

In Chapter Three, I review phenomenology, including differentiating the transcendental (descriptive) tradition from the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition. I provide a brief history of the philosophical and methodological development of hermeneutic phenomenology. I outline key components of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding first-year social workers, explore my own subjective positioning with regard to the topic, and discuss the

limitations of the approach. Finally, I describe my research design and address trustworthiness and credibility.

In the following five chapters (Chapters Four through Eight inclusive), I explore the key themes arising from my analysis of the data. I provide interpretations of: the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year social workers (Chapter Four); institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the social work role (Chapter Five); first-year social workers' fears of committing a cataclysmic error in practice (Chapter Six); the meaning of encountering one's own privilege and marginalization (Chapter Seven); and disappointments in early practice and individual narratives of transformation and idealism renegotiated (Chapter Eight).

In Chapter Nine, I connect my findings back to the extant literature and affirm my work's unique contribution to knowledge in this area, and analyze the strengths, limitations, delimitations, transferability, and validation of my work.

In Chapter Ten, I summarize my findings; review the application of my work to social work education, practice, and research; and explore my own development as a researcher as I investigated this topic.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I establish the context for social work in Alberta, Canada (including female predominance in social work and gender relations in the profession, the influence of socio-political factors on practice, and our unique provincial and national contexts). I then present a comprehensive review of the extant literature focusing on first-year social workers and novice workers in allied disciplines, and substantiate the need for further Canadian research in this area. I also present symbolic interactionism as an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of new social workers.

Context

Social work as a gendered profession.

Social work is a female-predominant profession, which is uniquely situated with regards to gender relations. Although the proportion of women social workers has fluctuated over time in North America, there has been a trend towards increased feminization. Women's numerical domination among American social work graduates has been increasing since at least 1953, at which time women made up 58% of social work graduates (undergraduate and graduate level combined) (Schilling, Morrish, & Liu, 2008). Over the second half of the twentieth century, there has been increased representation of women at all educational levels in social work: in 1974, women represented 75% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) graduates, 65% of Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates, and just under 36% of doctoral graduates; in 2000, the numbers rose to 88% for BSW graduates, 85% for MSW graduates, and 73% for doctoral graduates (Schilling et al., 2008).

It is therefore not surprising that social work has historically been viewed as a women's profession. Discourses around social work and women (and more recently—men and masculinities) reveal social work's highly gendered nature. In fact, social work is often referred to as a “female-dominated profession”—a description that McPhail (2004) critiqued in the hopes of removing this misnomer from the lexicon of social workers. In her provocative article, McPhail challenged equating women's numerical representation in social work with dominance (with dominance implying power, status, and influence). McPhail (2004) presented evidence in support of her conclusion that social work can be more accurately understood as a “female majority, male-dominated profession” (p. 325). Although the majority of direct service social workers have historically been women, women social workers are underrepresented in administration, policy work, and higher education faculty. Men in social work are seen to benefit from the glass elevator effect (described by Williams, 1992) whereby their career development is positively impacted by their gender status, including preferential hiring and encouragement to pursue administrative opportunities. Additionally, much traditional social work curricula focus on male theorists and models of male development (e.g., Kohlberg and Erickson) even though these models have been criticized for their androcentric biases. Furthermore, McPhail illustrated how the caregiving functions of social work, which are at times assumed to be natural extensions of women's “essential” nurturing nature, are only part of the professional requirements of social workers; analytical ability, research, professional autonomy, and decisiveness are just as critical to good practice and less likely to be conceptualized as female attributes. McPhail argued that correcting the misconception that social work is a ‘female-dominated profession’ is important not just for the purpose of accuracy, but also so that sexism and gender inequality in social work are not rendered invisible.

Social work is marked by significant sex segregation. In social work this segregation is both vertical/hierarchical (i.e., involving the disproportionate placement of men and women in front-line, supervisory, middle management, and executive positions) and horizontal/related to distribution across specializations and areas of practice. McLean (2003) analyzed the distribution of 585 British men who participated in the Workforce Studies by the National Institute for Social Work. The participants were all social care workers or qualified social workers. In the United Kingdom, social care workers provide direct care to service-users but are not credentialed as social workers, and may include residential and home care workers. McLean reported that while men composed 14% of the British social care/social work workforce, they were disproportionately represented in management positions. Specifically, while 60% of senior managers were men, the proportion of men decreased and the proportion of women increased with each position type conceived as a step down in terms of status, with men being: 25% of first-tier managers, 21% of field workers, 15% of residential workers, and 1% of home care workers. Nevertheless, most men were not senior managers; as McLean (2003) observed, “in spite of the higher proportion of men in higher-status jobs, the majority were in basic grade jobs as field worker, residential worker, or home care worker” (p. 53). However, 42% were either first-tier or senior managers, clearly disproportionate to their representation in social care/social work of 14%. Men were also disproportionally represented in serving individuals with severe learning disabilities, and disproportionately under-represented in serving older adults. Intersecting social positions including racialized and sexual identities also influence occupational sex segregation in social work. McLean concluded that:

Comparisons . . . of the distribution of men in social services might be regarded as belonging to the ‘privileged’ hegemony (broadly white, able-bodied heterosexual men, or

men not disclosing a marginalized status) with the distribution of women and ‘other’ men seem to support this. Whereas two-fifths of ‘privileged’ men were managers, this applied to only one-fifth of black men. (p. 63).

In general, care-giving work is often under-valued and seen as a natural extension of women’s kinship and household responsibilities (Lewis, 2004). While male workers in care-giving occupations may explicitly or implicitly challenge the conflation of care-giving work with femininity (Leonard, 2006; Warde, 2009), the need for this challenge highlights the fundamental ideological incompatibility of care work with notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2009; Gillingham, 2006; McLean, 2003). In social work, care-giving work is seen as natural for the profession’s predominantly female practitioners, and is “therefore given little recognition in terms of social status and prestige” (Lewis, 2004). The degradation of care-giving work has involved questions about its value in the marketplace, especially when compared to work predominantly performed by men:

Whereas care work has been defined in terms of feminine gender norms that emphasize selflessness, emotionality, morality, and nurturing; “real” work has been defined as rational and impersonal—qualities associated with masculinity and requiring specialized knowledge or skills to advance. (Sulik, 2007, p. 300)

Workers’ class positions and racialized identities intersect with gender to shape occupational experiences, constraining opportunities and simultaneously creating potential sites for resistance and “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in ways that may challenge rather than reproduce existing gender ideologies (Deutsch, 2007; Sullivan, 2004; c.f. Warde, 2009). Social inequalities related to gender, race, and class are reproduced in the workplace (Williams, 2004), and job segregation based on these social positions is both horizontal and vertical. The inter-

sectionality of social actors in workplaces involves unique and dynamic patterns of gendered activity—what Connell (2009) termed “configurations of gender practice” (p. 101). Consider for example the perspective of Black and Hispanic male social workers in Warde’s (2009a) research, wherein the men articulated that they brought a unique and valuable perspective to social work, including the ability to be a role model and mentor to children (Warde, 2009a). In this study, the social workers invoked their gendered and racialized identities as assets to their practice, and as unique strengths derived from both an insider perspective (as social workers returning to work in their own communities) and an outsider-within perspective (as male social workers in a predominantly female profession) (Collins, 1986).

Lewis (2004) explored the professional identities of Australian social workers practicing as counsellors and psychotherapists, and found gender to be a salient theme, which also intersected with class. The male participants were more likely to describe their socioeconomic background as working class, while the female participants were more likely to identify with a middle-class background. For women, social work as a career had been presented to them (often by their mothers) as work that could be structured around childrearing responsibilities, while for men social work was seen as an “accessible mid-range profession” (Lewis, 2004, p. 399) upon finishing school. Many of the women social workers ultimately found their workplaces to be unsupportive of their childrearing responsibilities, reflecting a discourse of professionalism that did not include room for leave-taking for raising children. Men spoke of feeling marginalized as the minority in social work, a theme that was not supported by men’s over-representation in higher status posts in social work. Lewis (2004) challenged that: “inequalities between men’s and women’s opportunities for career progression within social work pose a paradox, given the social justice base of the profession” (p. 405).

Christie (1998) sought to explore whether social work is truly a non-traditional occupation for men in order to “problematize the concept of non-traditional occupations in relation to gender” and “encourage a broader debate about men’s positions as social workers” (p. 492). Christie (1998) presented six reasons why social work is often considered a non-traditional occupation for men: the majority of social workers are women, the majority of social work students are women, most social work services users are women and children, social work is a caring profession, social work qualification requires competence in anti-discriminatory practice, and social work takes place in an “intermediate zone” (p. 501) between public and private domains. Christie (1998) challenged the completeness of Williams’ models of men’s strategies to cope with gender non-congruent work by highlighting an overemphasis on men’s agentic gendered strategies and an under-emphasis on women’s; an assumption of coherent masculine and professional identities; a lack of attention to shifting labour market realities; and the idea of tradition as applied to social work:

The concept of ‘tradition’ also raises questions about the fixity of social work as a social phenomenon. Social work is a relatively ‘youthful’ profession which has undergone, and continues to undergo, shifts in professional orientation and organization. (pp. 504–505)

Although Christie’s (1998) emphasis on the importance of understanding both men and women as agents in the construction of gendered professional identities, and the dynamic, shifting, and situated nature of identity itself are well-founded, he is perhaps veering away from the empirical evidence when he questions whether the idea of tradition is useful in understanding the gendered nature of social work. Demographically, social work witnessed feminization of the profession over the second half of the twentieth century, and when this trend is combined with the high female majority among practitioners, the evidence seems sufficient to conceptualize social work

as a female-predominant profession, which therefore renders social work a non-traditional occupation for men. Of course, like most female-predominant occupations, not all social work jobs are non-traditional for men—for example, the evidence from McLean (2003) would suggest that senior management positions in social work are not non-traditional posts for men.

In 2006, Christie published an article presenting a more nuanced illustration of men in social work, exploring how male social workers both self-constructed and were constructed by their female colleagues. In his interviews with male and female British social workers, Christie (2006) identified discourses around men's motivations for pursuing social work, refusal to identify with social work career choice, "and idealized discourses of masculinity" (p. 392) involving representation as "heroic men of action and/or as 'gentle-men'" (p. 398). Taking a modified theoretical stance from his 1998 work, Christie stated, "each of these discourses represents a way of inhabiting a feminized profession" (p. 392). Male participants in Christie's study talked about evading questions about what type of work they do and anticipating negative responses should they disclose they are social workers. One participant sometimes told strangers at parties that he was "an accountant for the local government, because I spend most of my time these days just filling in forms and counting pennies" (p. 393). While Christie postulated that it may not be uncommon for both male and female social workers to hide their professional identities outside of work because social work in the United Kingdom has a poor public image, the male participants described these encounters in response to questions about being men in social work. Men also described being pushed, falling into, or drifting into social work. Notably, two male participants who described having actively chosen social work were transitioning from careers as nurses, and "instead of being strongly identified with 'care', social work was seen as a profession in which they would provide less direct care and could develop

more change-oriented aspects of their work” (Christie, 2006, p. 397). Christie found that the two former nurses identified with the technical, specialized, and action-oriented work involved in social work, and noted that these forms of work are more often associated with hegemonic masculinity.

When asked why their male colleagues might have pursued social work, Christie’s (2006) female participants presented discourses that were not gender differentiated, often suggesting that men and women entered social work for similar reasons, centered around providing care to others. However some women did question male social workers’ commitment to the caring ethos of social work, for example when men social workers seemed to find sexual harassment training humorous. A number of female participants also suggested that the men pursued social work for strategic rather than care-oriented reasons, with the hopes that they would quickly climb the occupational ladder.

The discourses of idealized masculinity (the heroic man of action and the gentle-man) were invoked by both the male and female social workers. The heroic men of action “does not ‘desert’ his colleagues at the ‘front line’ and uses only ‘legitimated’ forms of violence” (Christie, 2006, p. 398). A heroic men of action discourse was invoked by one woman social worker when describing male social workers who were:

very power driven, very motivated, perhaps come from army, police backgrounds, youth justice. They were people [men social workers] that very much wanted to, you know, they’d be banging their fist down and sorting stuff out and putting society to rights. They felt that they had a fight on their hands, and that they were going, you know, to fight the good fight. (Christie, 2006, p. 399)

Christie located the discourse of heroic men of action in relation to the development of the British welfare state as part of patriarchal, colonial empire building. Men social workers, not unlike soldiers, achieve this status by working long hours, managing social crisis, and protecting women colleagues from violence. Women social workers often supported this form of hegemonic masculinity by presenting their male colleagues as protectors who could be called upon when undertaking dangerous work where there was the potential for violence to erupt.

In contrast, the gentle-man social workers were constructed as “soft and caring, upright and moral, and adhering to particular codes of conduct” (Christie, 2006, p. 403). The gentle-man represents an ideal of social worker masculinity as set apart from the behaviour of other men—the gentle-man social worker as guided by a higher moral code. This is also a way for male social workers to distance themselves from the violence and sexism they see in other men, particularly some male clients. The gentle-man is part “old fashioned chivalrous gentleman and part ‘new man’” (Christie, 2006, p. 404), with the chivalrous gentleman component representing class background, gender, and British nationality. Given the presence of these gendered discourses in social work, and social work’s perceived role in “policing normative heterosexual familial gender relations” (Christie, 2006, p. 407), Christie questioned whether social work is truly positioned to be a leader in de-traditionalizing gender relations, despite social work’s commitment to anti-oppressive practice.

There is evidence of sufficient depth and breadth for reaching the conclusion that social work is deeply gendered work: social work is a female-predominant profession that has seen increased feminization since the 1950s; essentialist ideas of female caregiving contribute to reduced status and remuneration in the social work field; both men and women “do gender” in

both conventional and transformative ways in social work; and there is significant horizontal and vertical segregation within social work.

Social work in socio-political context.

Abramovitz (1998) argued that “social work has always been political, in that it deals either with human consciousness or the allocation of resources” (p. 524). Social work is a constructed (and contested) activity (Payne, 2005), consisting of multiple perspectives rather than a homogenous professional culture. Although social workers are unified by a shared definition of social work and general commitment to principles of social justice, there are also multiple, competing viewpoints within and about the profession. Furthermore, there are national and regional differences in the roles that social workers are expected to fulfill, with the Nation state largely determining the boundaries of most conventional social work practice. While social workers are increasingly influenced by the growing globalization of social problems such as armed conflict, natural disasters, forced migration, pandemic disease, poverty, and inequality, they often respond to these phenomena in the context of their regional and national systems of emergency aid and social welfare (Lyons, Manion, & Carlsen, 2006). Connolly and Harms (2012) identified social work as a “global endeavour in terms of disciplinary vision, values and concerns. Yet it is also intensely local in its application, responding necessarily to unique cultural contexts” (p. xii). Governments and agencies that employ social workers add further complexity to understanding social work in context—political and employer (governmental and non-governmental) views on social welfare and social work are not always congruent with those espoused by those representing the social work profession.

Doing work that is often considered low status (Barretti, 2004), social workers operate at the boundaries of multiple, and sometimes competing, systems such as private/public and state/market domains. Social work is a self-conscious and conflicted profession, alternately positioned as in partnership with the poor and marginalized and as a social control agent for the state (Lorenzetti, as cited in Galad, 2012). Ultimately, social work is a social, relational, and political construct. These larger socio-political tensions in social work at the macro level inevitably influence the experiences of new social work practitioners.

Social work in Alberta.

I conducted this research with a focus on the experiences of Alberta social workers, with the sample taken from Calgary-area social workers for feasibility of the research. Canada is a federal system of government, in which responsibilities for health, social welfare, and education constitutionally fall to the country's provinces (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2012), as does the authority to regulate professions, including social work (MacDonald & Adachi, 2001). In terms of population, Alberta is Canada's fourth largest province, with a population of 3,873.7 thousand as of July 1, 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2012a). Alberta's portion of the Canadian population is growing—from 9.3% on January 1, 1993 to 11.2% on January 1, 2013 (Employment & Social Development Canada, 2014). Alberta has the youngest population of all the Canadian provinces with a median age of 36.1 years as of July 1, 2012, the highest provincial proportion of working age persons at 70.6%, and the lowest proportion of persons aged 65 and older at 11.1% (Statistics Canada, 2012). Alberta's demographics are influenced by high fertility and additions from interprovincial migration (Statistics Canada, 2012). Alberta has a strong and diverse economy; top contributors to Alberta GDP in 2012 were energy (22.1%), finance and real estate

(13.1%), construction (11.8%), and business and community services (10.6%) (Government of Alberta, 2013).

In Alberta, under the province's Health Professions Act, all qualified social workers practicing within the scope of social work must be registered, regardless of their employer or position (Alberta College of Social Workers, n.d.a)—distinguishing Alberta from several other major Canadian provinces, including Ontario and British Columbia, where no such legislation mandating universal social worker registration exists, and the Maritime provinces which have practice protection, in effect requiring registration to access designated social work positions and ensuring only registered social workers are hired into social work positions (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013). At the end of 2012, there were over 6,500 registered social workers in Alberta (Alberta College of Social Workers, 2012). Social work education in Alberta is provided at the diploma, undergraduate, masters, and PhD level through two universities and eight colleges (Alberta College of Social Workers, n.d.). In Alberta, social workers are employed in a range of roles across public, private, government-contracted, and not-for-profit settings.

Rationale for Canadian Research

The number of students graduating from Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs in Canada is steadily increasing. In 2003, 2,874 students graduated with bachelors or masters in social work from 34 schools across Canada; in 2009 the number was 3,475 (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2010)—an increase of 21% over six years. The need for social workers in Canada has increased as “the demand for social services has both diversified and intensified” (Service Canada, 2012, para. 14); furthermore, the “trend toward sharp employment growth”

(Service Canada, 2012, para. 5) in social work is expected to continue. Employment growth in health care and social assistance is a longer-term trend, superseded only by construction in its increasing numbers of workers (Lin, 2008).

Despite the increasing numbers of social workers entering the Canadian workforce, there is scant empirical evidence on the workplace entry and experiences of first-year Canadian social workers (Newberry, 2011), although during the period in which I conducted my thesis research there was a “burgeoning of material on the experiences of newly qualified social workers” (Manthorpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Hussein, & Sharpe, 2014, p. 97) internationally, particularly in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, the context is one of significant policy interest in the performance of social work generally, and the educational preparation and workplace induction of social workers more particularly (Hussein, Moriarty, Stevens, Sharpe, & Manthorpe, 2014). In this review, only two articles from Canada were found (i.e., Csiernik, et al., 2010; Paré & Le Maistre, 2006). Furthermore, “social work as a profession and institution is constructed through nation states – in terms of policy, legal systems, economics and practice” (Campanini et al., 2012, p. 36). However, based on their more developed literature, recommendations for practice, education, and research may be drawn from findings from the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the American and British social work contexts are markedly different from that of Canada, making it difficult to generalize concrete practice applications between countries; however, the findings can be applied as a basis for analysis specific to the Canadian context and for informing research focus and design.

Social work in the United Kingdom.

The research reviewed from the United Kingdom reflects significant socio-political interest in social work education and the induction of new social workers in the context of a changing and unstable workforce. Eight of the eleven United Kingdom articles report on research commissioned by government bodies in light of significant changes to social work education and regulation in the United Kingdom during the last two decades. The United Kingdom has had to cope with a shortage of social care workers and social workers for some time, leading to debates about the causes of the challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers (Bradley, 2008). In addition, the social work profession in the United Kingdom has been described as unstable with a poor occupational image (Bradley, 2008). In the last 10 years, social work in the United Kingdom has experienced multiple regulatory and educational changes. For example, in England the Care Standards Act was introduced in 2000, and professional practice standards were introduced in 2002 (Bates et al, 2009). The former Diploma of Social Work was replaced by a three-year undergraduate degree program, which graduated the first cohort of students in the summer of 2006 (Bates et al., 2009), whereas Canada has a long tradition of preparing social workers through the Bachelor of Social Work degree, with a dozen Canadian universities offering accredited Bachelor of Social Work programs by the 1970s. The new British degree increased the number of days in field placement in order to better prepare social work students for professional practice upon graduation (Bates et al., 2009). The introduction of the degree was followed by intensive evaluation, in which positive reports were overshadowed by research completed by the Children's Workforce Development Council suggesting that the new degree did not actually prepare students for professional social work

practice (Bates et al., 2009). This led to government-commissioned research investigating the efficacy of the new degree (Bates et al., 2009).

Induction processes in the United Kingdom were formalized in 2006 for social workers in adult and children's services via Common Induction Standards through the Children's Workforce Development Council and Skills for Care, but "the extent to which an induction follows a formal structure varies between employers" (Bates et al., 2009, p. 155). In 2008, the Children's Workforce Development Council piloted a Newly Qualified Social Work program for those in children and family services, followed by full implementation in 2009, with the goals of increasing new social worker's confidence and competency in children and family services, as well as job satisfaction and retention (Carpenter, Shardlow, Patsios, & Wood, 2013). This program included protected time and funds for professional development, a slightly reduced caseload (90%), access to regular supervision, and comparison against outcome measures to be achieved at the end of the first year (with subsequent milestones later identified for the end of the three year early-career period) (Carpenter et al., 2009). In 2009, following the high-profile death of a child receiving social work services, the English government appointed a Social Work Task Force to review the field broadly and recommend reforms (Carpenter et al., 2013). This task force again raised concerns about the educational preparation and readiness to practice of English social work graduates (Carpenter et al., 2013). Subsequently in September, 2012 the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) was introduced, a program based largely on the Newly Qualified Social Worker program in children and family services, applying to all first-year social workers, and including both evaluative and supportive components (Skills for Care, 2012)—resulting in a substantial increase in the peer-reviewed literature about first-year social work in England (although at the time of writing, not yet focused specifically on the

ASYE). The Newly Qualified Social Worker program and the ASYE may reflect a trend in the United Kingdom away from viewing social work education as the final step in professional preparation and towards viewing graduation as a developmental milestone in which professional preparedness is consolidated and advanced through workplace learning; this represents a distinct way of looking at professional education that stands in contrast to proponents of education as the end product of professional preparation (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011).

The ASYE is government-funded and is part of a larger program of social work reform in England (Berry-Lound & Rowe, 2013). Much of this literature became available after the completion of the data collection and analysis phase of my thesis research, but I have included this material as informative to our understanding of first-year social workers (although it was not available at the time I was conceiving and designing my study). This unstable practice context and high level of government regulation of social work provided the impetus for the majority of the United Kingdom studies reviewed herein.

Social work in the United States of America.

American social work is embedded in a system of social welfare that has been undergoing retrenchment since 1969, including an increasingly market-based approach (Blau, 2005), which is in contrast to the concept of social welfare as intrinsic to national identity as found in the Canadian context (Holosko & Leslie, 2001; Rice, 2005). American social workers also practice in the context of privatized medicine, in contrast to Canada's publically funded system. The American social work context has been differentiated since the 1970s by a focus on clinical rather than structural issues as the point of intervention for social workers (Stuart, 2005). By the 1980s, all American states regulated social work through a process of licensing social

workers (Stuart, 2005). Licensing requirements vary by state, but typically an MSW degree is required, as well as a test and a period of supervised practice (Rosenthal, 2003).

Social work in Canada.

Canadian social workers practice in the context of a more comprehensive system of social welfare that, while failing to eradicate poverty and like the United States undergoing retrenchment (since the mid-1970's) (Graham et al., 2012), provides a safety net that is a valued part of the Canadian identity (Rice, 2005). Each province/territory establishes the requirements for regulation of the social work profession in that jurisdiction. Social work is a self-regulating profession, whereby the professional colleges for each province/territory establish the admission requirements for new members, codes of ethics, and professional practice standards for their members. The social work colleges also handle any non-criminal disciplinary matters. In most Canadian provinces, registration as a professional social worker is required for all persons with a social work degree (or in the case of Alberta, diploma) practicing within the scope of social work, and the title "social worker" is legally protected. Some jurisdictions require a period of provisional registration for new members (MacDonald & Adachi, 2001). Canadian social work is also distinguished from American social work by the emergence of structural social work in education and practice in the 1970s (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 1997). Mullaly (1997) argued that "the term 'structural' is prescriptive for social work practice as it indicates that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not solely on the individual" (p. 104).

Analytical transferability.

Clearly, there are significant differences in regulation, legislation, education, and workforce stability, among other factors, between the United Kingdom, the United States, and

Canada that make blanket generalizations to the Canadian context problematic. However, the social work contexts have some things in common as well—e.g., social work as a predominantly female profession (Sullivan, 2005); humanitarian and democratic ideals (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000); and the applied use of helping skills, knowledge, and values to ameliorate various forms of social distress. Additionally, while the Canadian educational context is notable for structural social work (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly 1997), striking an appropriate balance between social reform and intervention at the individual and family level in social work has been a long-standing and critical debate across North America (Edwards, Shera, Reid, & York, 2006; Graham, 1996; Haynes, 1998). Therefore, prominent themes from the American and United Kingdom literatures may inform the development of a Canadian body of literature on first-year social workers.

New Social Workers

As I will demonstrate, there is a relatively small body of peer-reviewed literature addressing the experiences of first-year social workers, when compared to scholarship on the allied professions of nursing and teaching. Much of what does exist comes from the United Kingdom and to a lesser degree, the United States. These international literatures reveal significant stressors for the new social worker and provide evidence of the importance of initiating and supporting new social workers in achieving a successful school-to-work transition. While the Canadian practice context is different from those of the United Kingdom and United States, the analytical grounds of the American and British research can be extrapolated to the Canadian context to provide a foundation for my research. In the literature, the terms first-year social worker, early-career social worker, new social worker, and newly qualified social worker

are used to describe beginning practitioners. While the focus of my research is on first-year practitioners, I review literature covering the early-career period (generally understood as the first three years) as well. Note that I have not included literature dealing with the experiences of social work students, unless it contains a dual focus on the experiences of new practitioners; students' experiences are significantly different from first-year social workers in terms of responsibilities, level of preparation, conceptual sophistication, and expectations.

The subjective experiences of new social workers.

Subjective experiences of first-year and early-career social workers identified in the literature include disillusionment and a loss of positive momentum, disruptive and distressing workplace experiences, insufficient support, and disturbances in personal well being. Positive experiences with clients and colleagues add balance to the picture.

Many of these themes are identified in the work of Jack and Donnellan (2009). These researchers examined the experiences of 13 social workers who had qualified as professional social workers within the previous 12 months and who were employed in children and family fieldwork teams in southwest England, as well as 10 of their direct supervisors. While the social workers started their jobs feeling positive and confident, "it was alarming to see how quickly these feelings drained away in the face of the day-to-day reality of the work they were required to do, and the conditions under which that work was undertaken" (p. 316). None of the social workers interviewed envisioned a long-term future within their current roles and many found the first year of practice to be "extremely challenging and even traumatic" (p. 308). The identified challenges centered on schisms between professional ideals and work realities; workload, stress, and exhaustion; varied access to quality and supportive supervision; and inconsistent access to

in-service training and professional development. Line managers also communicated that they felt pressure from both upper management and front-line workers and that they were inadequately supported in their roles as supervisors. Jack and Donnellan concluded that the support needs of both new social workers and their line managers must be attended to in order to ensure the sustainability of child and family services. Line managers needed support to help newly qualified social workers develop engaged coping mechanisms early in their careers.

Guerin, Devitt, and Redmond (2010) completed a survey of 73 social workers that had graduated in the previous two to six years from a Master of Social Work (MSW) program in an Irish university (response rate of 48.6%). They found that the social workers had a high degree of job mobility, with an average of three since graduation. Structural and support issues such as a lack of support and supervision, staff shortages, and a lack of resources were the most frequent explanations for leaving a job. Other work-related reasons included the “negative nature of the social work role” (p. 2476), other employment opportunities, negative workplace interactions, and stress levels. Additionally, “for a significant group, the professional experience was more stressful and more demanding of the expertise than they had expected and almost one in five reported that the experience was less satisfying than expected.” (p. 2474). Negative experiences were related to problematic management structures, lack of resources and support, difficult relationships with colleagues, perceptions of other professionals of the role of the social worker, and caseload levels. Also, 40% of the social worker participants had experienced violence or aggression from a client. At the same time, 70% identified positive aspects of their role, including opportunities for personal development, support, workplace relationships, and working as part of a team. Forty-seven percent of the social workers also included experiences with clients as positive aspects of their roles, including having good relationships with clients and

seeing positive outcomes for them. Guerin et al. recommended further analysis of early-career job mobility, given that many participants were “moving between posts, citing poor organizational structure and support as the main reason for leaving” (p. 2479). From an educational perspective, as well as preparing social workers for client work, educators must prepare them “to cope within complex, often managerially focused workplace environments” (p. 2481). Within the workplace, they advocated for support for personal development, well-being, and development of professional confidence, given the stresses and challenges encountered by the social workers. From a broader perspective on the profession of social work, the authors identified “the need for greater autonomy, variety and continuous support within the social work role as well as professional and personal development at the managerial, structural level and at the level of the individual social worker and social work curriculum must be recognized” (p. 2481).

Chenot, Benton, and Kim (2009) studied the influence of supervisor support, peer support, and organizational culture on early-career (defined as having one day to three years of experience) child welfare workers in California. Only 37% of the sample of 767 employees of child welfare agencies had degrees in social work at the bachelor or masters level; nonetheless, the majority of the participants classified themselves as social workers. The Chenot et al. sample also included a small number of nurses, human services assistants, and administrative assistants. Despite the ambiguity of the “social worker” sample, some key findings emerged which could be investigated in the Canadian context.

Chenot et al. (2009) determined that the agency retention prospects of early-career workers were uniquely influenced by factors that did not impact the prospects of mid- to late-career workers, whose ratings of intent to stay in their agencies became more uniform. Overall,

intention to stay in the agency and the field of child welfare rose with experience in the field. For early-career social workers, peer and supervisor support predicted retention in the agency, with supervisor support also predicting retention within the field of child welfare. Having an MSW and a passive defensive organizational culture (characterized by a focus on approval, conformity, evasion of responsibility, and suppression of change efforts) negatively impacted the agency retention of early-career social workers, although those with an MSW were more likely to intend to stay in the child welfare field. The researchers highlighted the unique role of supervisor support for the retention decisions of early-career social workers and recommended that supervisors receive additional support and training (Chenot et al.).

In England, Hussein et al. (2014) conducted an examination leading to a model of the relationship between: (1) new social workers' evaluations of their educational preparation, facets of their work environments, and their personal characteristics, and; (2) job satisfaction and intention to stay in or leave their present jobs. This model was developed as part of a larger study, detailed further in the induction section, which resulted in the publication of several academic articles discussing various aspects of the results (see also: Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, & Sharpe, 2013; Manthorpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Hussein, & Sharpe, 2014); Hussein et al. (2014)/ Manthorpe et al. (2013/2014) completed a mixed methods study funded by the Department of Health in the context of evaluating the 2006 introduction of the new social work degree in the United Kingdom. A primary strength of this work is the use of multiple points of data collection—three online (sequential) surveys of recent social work graduates (n=280); semi-structured interviews with direct social work supervisors (n=23); and online surveys of social work directors (n=56). The sample size of newly graduated social workers allowed for reliable statistical analysis of relationships between variables, although the response

rate was marginal at 29 to 44 percent and retention across the survey sequence was not reported. I will discuss Hussein et al.'s model here, and discuss the two other academic articles generated by this team in the induction section. Hussein et al. constructed a job satisfaction analytical model and found three variables that significantly predicted job enjoyment among first and second-year English social workers: high job engagement, high ability to express values in practice, and feeling well-prepared by the social work degree. The intention to leave analytical model revealed only two significant predictors: perception of a supportive team (reduced likelihood of intention to leave) and working in the private or voluntary sector (increased likelihood of intention to leave).

While not focused specifically on understanding the experiences of new social workers, Adams, Matto, and Harrington (2001) used 49 items from six of the Traumatic Stress Institute subscales, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), and the Perceived Social Support—Friends Subscale with a random sample of 185 American MSW-prepared clinical social workers (marginal response rate of 38.5%). They found younger and less experienced social workers had more disturbances in their beliefs about themselves and their relationships, more somatic symptoms, higher depersonalization, lower personal accomplishment, and more intrusive thoughts about clients outside of work than older and more experienced workers. Age was associated with somatic symptoms ($r = -.207, p < .01$), intrusion ($r = -.172, p < .05$), MBI Personal Accomplishment (PA) Subscale ($r = .207, p < .01$), and MBI Depersonalization (DP) Subscale ($r = -.163; p < .05$). Years of practice were associated with somatic symptoms ($r = -.166, p < .05$), intrusion ($r = -.157, p < .05$), MBI PA ($r = .274, p < .01$), and MBI DP ($r = -.160, p < .05$). Adams et al. asserted the need for supportive supervision for new social workers and qualitative research on the experiences of new social workers.

In a study of secondary traumatic stress, Badger, Royse, and Craig (2008) explored the predictive abilities of empathy (Interpersonal Reactivity Scale), emotional separation (Maintenance of Emotional Separation Scale), occupational stress (Work-Related Strain Inventory), and social support (Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support) on secondary traumatic stress (Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale) of hospital social workers. A very good response rate of 73% resulted in a sample of 121 American trauma centre social workers. A weak correlation was found for STSS scores and years of experience in social work ($r = -.19, p < .001$).

Warde (2009a) completed focus group research with 7 recently graduated BSW and MSW-prepared African-American and Hispanic male social workers in the United States of American, with the goal of understanding their career choice, perspectives on entering a predominantly female profession, and aspirations in social work. Three influences on career choice were identified: goal of contributing back to the community, altruism, and own experiences with a social worker. As noted in a previous section of this paper, the participants identified the intersection of their gender and racial identities as providing the basis for a unique and strengthening perspective within the profession:

most believed that it was the ideal profession for men of color who come from disadvantaged communities and wanted to do something to make their community and others like it better. They also believe that as men of color who have had the experience of living in disadvantaged communities, they bring a much-needed perspective to the profession. (Warde, 2009a, p. 140)

Overall, the social workers in Warde's (2009) study had a positive view of their futures within social work, seeing themselves in leadership roles within social service agencies. A notable

strength of this research is its dual attention to both structure and the meaning of experience, situated within a larger societal context.

Preparedness for practice.

How prepared do graduates of social work degree and diploma programs feel themselves to be, in relation to the practice of social work? A small number of studies, primarily conducted in the United Kingdom, address this question. In England, the new ASYE program outlines the outcomes social workers should achieve by the end of the program, including competence in areas such as managing referrals, communication, and professional accountability (Carpenter et al. 2013). The Canadian Council for Social Work Regulators (2012) is undertaking new work in this area, with a focus on finalizing a profile of minimum entry-level competencies for Canadian social workers, including areas such as applying ethical standards, delivering services, and engaging in reflective practice and professional development. For the purposes of this literature review, I have excluded work dealing exclusively with preparedness for specialist areas of social work practice or work with particular populations to keep the focus on generalist practice.

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) undertook a large, comprehensive study of the educational preparation, readiness for practice, and induction of new social workers in Wales, England, and Scotland in the early 1990s. The study included both social workers and probation officers prepared through a social work qualifying program (certificate or diploma)—both groups considered as new social workers for the purposes of this literature review. A mixed-methods approach with 714 newly qualified social workers and 69 line supervisors allowed breadth and depth of analysis. The study was funded by the Department of Health and the Scottish Office “in the context of a long debate leading to the changeover to a new Diploma in Social Work” (p.

viii). The new social workers were surveyed both upon completing their qualifying program and again nine months after graduation, allowing comparisons across time. Qualitative interviews with a sample of the survey respondents (both social workers and line managers) further illuminated the topic.

Upon qualifying and starting work, just over one-half of social workers reported that their expectations regarding what their work would be like were generally met, while 47% found social work practice to be different from what they expected. The expectations of this 47% are particularly interesting in light of the fact that 80% of participants had social welfare experience, which in many cases was substantial, prior to starting training. Regardless of whether work was what they expected, “the great majority of newly qualified were clear that they were doing the job they wanted to do upon qualification and many of them were enthusiastic despite the pressures they were experiencing” (p. 31). Positive features of work for some participants were variety, autonomy, collegial support, and good supervision. Negative factors that acted as disappointments to some participants included workload issues, bureaucracy and paperwork, lack of resources, lack of support and supervision, and a focus on crisis-oriented intervention.

Almost all (95%) reported anxiety about starting work and the vast majority found social work to be stressful when they started practice. Over one-half disclosed that their work was having an impact on their personal lives, with work spilling over despite attempts to keep “work at work” (p. 143). The particular stresses identified by the social workers often reflected concern for very vulnerable clients (e.g., child abuse, suicide threats, persons with mental illness living without adequate supports), concern for the public (e.g., sex offenders), and concern for their own safety (e.g., threats of violence). At nine months, approximately three-quarters had interacted with hostile clients, and only three out of ten felt prepared by their program to handle

these interactions. Social worker participants also lamented the expectations of service users and the public, with service-users expecting more than the social workers could provide and the public seeing social workers as more powerful than the social workers felt, as they had “to manage with very limited resources, bureaucratic structures and little autonomy or discretion” (p. 129). The very nature of social work was seen differently by those who had expected “more or less an autonomous profession largely determining its own goals and methods of work” (p. 141), with line managers who presented the objectives and methods of work as being increasingly dictated by government policy and legislation. Bureaucracy and the “recognition that effecting change or promoting notions of social justice had only very limited scope within the social work services” (p. 143) challenged social workers’ idealistic ideas of social work and social justice.

Once within agencies, structured induction and supportive supervision were available to some, but not all, the social workers, and were identified as critical in beginning practice. Line managers themselves felt unprepared for their supervision duties at times, and were often overwhelmed in their own positions.

In the United Kingdom, Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) conducted survey and interview research, commissioned by the Training Organization for the Personal Social Services, with 115 social workers who had completed their Diplomas of Social Work in Wales in the previous two years, 25 of their direct supervisors, and 25 senior social services managers. The goal of the research was to determine how well the Diploma of Social Work prepared social workers to begin practice. Twelve key competency areas previously identified by the commissioning agency were reflected in the survey questions. When competency scores from the postal surveys were aggregated for statistical analysis, the study found that nearly 90% of respondents assessed their training in the 12 key competency areas as adequate or more than adequate. However, when the

competency scores were analyzed individually, over one-quarter of postal survey respondents considered themselves less-than-adequately or poorly trained in the competencies “Intervene and Provide” and “Work in Organizations” (Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002, p. 24). Children’s services social workers generally rated their training more poorly than did their counterparts in adult care. The largest skill deficit noted by all three categories of respondents was in risk management and administration.

Bates et al. (2009) conducted a study, commissioned by Skills for Care Southwest, to determine the learning and development needs of new social workers in their first year of practice in England. Twenty-two new social workers participated, as well as their direct supervisors, two caregivers, and two service-users. The social workers appeared to be generally satisfied with their educational preparation for practice (i.e., their social work degrees), but faced inconsistent application of induction by employers. Specifically, more than 75% of the new social workers

agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well prepared in areas such as communication skills, social work methods, responding to cultural differences, social work law, critical perspectives, evidence and research-based practice, social work values, working in an organization, inter-professional working, and the roles and responsibilities of a social worker. (p. 161)

However, the proportion of social workers that agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well prepared in instrumental skills was notably lower (e.g., court skills at 20% and case management at 45%). Bates et al. recommended that future researchers focus on the career path of social workers and their development needs across the career trajectory. They also advocated for continued research on England’s new social work degree and a longitudinal study to follow up

with their participants in three years' time. The authors positioned this type of future research on the school-to-work transition of social workers as necessary to inform practices that will support a competent workforce. From a practice perspective, they advocated for investing in newly qualified social workers to help retain staff and improve quality of care.

In a pilot phenomenological study conducted in England, Sweden, and Italy, Campanini, Frost, and Höjer, (2012) found nation state to influence participants' (n = 14) perceptions of preparedness for practice upon graduation and one year after starting social work practice. The researchers found the "Ambivalent English Social Workers" (p. 38) to be concerned about avoiding burnout and other hardships associated with social work, and (consistent with other UK research) ambivalent about the value of their degrees to their practice, at times being "dismissive and critical" (p. 38) of their education. Perhaps paradoxically, the English social workers valued the role of the degree in preparing them to become social workers while rejecting its ability to provide them with direct skills for practice. In particular, participants felt unprepared for court work, interventions with children, mental health work, child protection assessments, and fundraising. The reality of the English participants' early practice included gaps in supervision, high administrative (paperwork) demands, and insufficient time for reflection.

Campanini et al. (2012) found the Italian participants to be a politically astute group who were highly personally engaged in their work. This group placed a high value on many aspects of their degree, such as the training in ethics, policy analysis, personal and professional identity development, and direct practice skills, but wanted more preparation geared to the specific Italian social services context such as "the ability to negotiate and persuade, local networking and resource location" (p. 40). Early practice for this group often consisted of short-term

contracts due to the lack of permanent openings, political wrangling with local politicians, and an absence of orientation or induction.

The Swedish participants were initially critical of their degree (on graduation) but a year later acknowledged being well prepared, within the limits of how prepared one can reasonably be for emotionally demanding work. This group “emphasized the role of the teachers and of active education methodologies (drama groups, for example, to interpret and “imagine” social problems) in the process of building a professional identity, and also the establishment of self-reflective attitude” (Campanini et al., 2012, p. 45). Campanini et al.’s research invites critical reflection in the preparedness debate, and highlights the importance of awareness of the socio-political context of practice when considering how education can help equip students for practice.

Induction.

With regards to induction, Bradley (2008) identified that “attitudes first formed about this beginning phase are likely to affect the career trajectory of social workers” (p. 349). In my literature review, five of the studies I examined pointed to inconsistency in induction processes as a source of stress for new social workers (i.e., Bates et al., 2009; Bradley, 2008; Jack & Donnellan, 2009; Jaskyte, 2005; Yan, Gao, & Lam, 2013).

Caregivers and service-users have also advocated for induction programs and regular supervision for new social workers (Bates et al., 2009). In the study conducted by Bates et al., just under three-quarters of the newly qualified social worker participants had a formal induction. As one social worker lamented, “I was supposed to have a slow, gentle introduction, but

basically there were a number of crises, so it was a baptism of fire” (Bates et al., 2009, p. 162).

Bates et al. concluded there is a need to invest in the management of induction processes.

What do first-year and early-career social workers report about their experiences of induction? Lyons and Manion (2004) reported on a large-scale survey of over 500 newly qualified social workers (response rates ranging from 56–81% in each cohort) from across the United Kingdom, six to twelve months after graduation, completed in 1993–1997, 2000, and 2002 (in 2002, surveyed in England and Wales only). The Central Council for Education and Training of Social Work and the Department of Health commissioned the studies. In the 2000 and 2002 studies, only 14% of respondents reported receiving regular supervision and one-third of respondents did not receive an induction program. In 2002, approximately two-thirds of graduates were satisfied with their social work education. The researchers found that, in particular, students appreciated course content on social work theory and law, while they were more critical of teaching on information technology, residential work, record keeping, and financial management. Note that the deficit areas identified are all instrumental skills. Recommendations for future research included using a qualitative dimension in similar studies and including the perspectives of service-users.

Jaskyte (2005) examined the impact of organizational socialization techniques (using six five-item scales developed by Jones in 1986) on the role ambiguity and role conflict (using a 14-item measure developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman in 1970) of 61 newly hired social workers (response rate of 32%) that had recently graduated from a MSW program from a southern American university. Jaskyte found that serial tactic (teaching and mentoring by senior workers) was used to socialize clinical social workers and disjunctive tactic (absence of teaching or mentoring by senior workers) was used to socialize supervisors and managers. In addition,

clinical social workers had higher role conflict than supervisors/managers, but lower role ambiguity. Institutionalized socialization tactic (composed of collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture strategies) lowered role ambiguity and conflict for both clinical social workers and supervisors/managers. Jaskyte's results also showed that socialization strategies employed by human service organizations were predominantly individualized, i.e., composed of informal, individual, random, and variable strategies. Jaskyte recommended formalized socialization programs including "orientation programs, educational/training programs, and job assignments" (p. 84). Job assignments involving serial tactic were highly recommended. Her recommendations for future research focused on future studies to build upon her exploratory study using larger samples, longitudinal designs, and more complex theoretical models of socialization.

Paré and Le Maistre (2006) studied Canadian social workers' school-to-work transitions, with a focus on what might constitute best practices in social worker induction in both field practicums and with new social workers. Over a three-year period, the researchers completed interviews with eleven social work students, nine supervisors, and five new social work practitioners; conducted focus groups with seven new social workers; completed on-site observations; and reviewed university field education documents. Paré and Le Maistre identified five general themes: the student's role in successful induction, the impact of the first days of practice on the social work student, the shared mentoring of a newcomer by the practice community, the benefits of linking newcomers to allied communities, and the benefits accrued by the practice community through participation in the induction process. Within each theme, they described promising practices that seemed to contribute to successful induction. Within the theme of the student's role in induction, they proposed students be active learners, purposively

setting goals for development of knowledge and skills and actively seeking out opportunities for growth. The first days of the practicum were found to be critical in making a social work student feel welcome and part of the practice community. “Distributed mentoring” (p. 373), wherein the newcomer is mentored by the entire team rather than one senior worker or supervisor, was recommended as central to successful induction. Connecting students and new practitioners to allied professionals as well as non-professional contacts such as families was conceptualized as preparing students and new social workers for “working on the boundary” (p. 375) of social work (I would argue that social work is inherently boundary work). Given the increasingly team-based, collaborative approaches to practice, as well as social work’s interface with informal supports and community members, the authors positioned this type of preparation as critical to the newcomer’s future success. Finally, the authors found that the whole team experienced significant benefits throughout the process of a successful newcomer induction. Paré and Le Maistre made the following comments about the importance of induction, recognizing the relationship between individuals and institutions:

The transition from school to work marks a critical moment in the lives of individuals and institutions. For the neophyte, the first days, weeks, and months of life in a professional community can set the stage for a successful and gratifying career—or lead to stagnation, disillusionment, and attrition. For the community, the arrival of a newcomer can mean fresh perspectives, new expertise, and revitalizing energy—or disruptions, resistance, and unwelcome work for veteran staff. (p. 363)

Bradley (2008) researched 10 newly appointed social workers in child and family care in northern England with the stated goal of describing, from the inductees’ perspective, the experience of a formal induction program. Eight of the 10 participants had received qualification

as a social worker within the year prior to the study, one had received qualification several years prior, and one was not qualified as a social worker. The research focused on the perceived impact of the participants' pre-qualifying education on their beginning practice, experiences of the induction program, and how supervision linked to the induction process. Bradley found that 60% of the social workers reported having received valuable course content on childcare interventions and relevant laws in their social work education. However, 50% of the social workers also felt that being more "reality based" and focusing on "real pressures" would have enhanced their training programs (p. 357). Sixty percent of the social workers reported positive experiences of supervision, and 50% reported that their induction learning was reinforced in supervision. Bradley concluded,

From this small study, it appeared that those who perceived that their needs within the supervisory relationship were not listened to, who were not treated with respect and given positive regard, were not in the best position to have their learning from induction reinforced, or to flourish professionally. (p. 357)

The researcher also found that 60% of participants learned best by shadowing and speaking with respected experienced staff, and that structural issues, such as under-staffing, at times impeded full organizational commitment to the newcomer's induction process. Of note, 60% of the participants expressed concern about whether the job was "right for them" (p. 358). In her discussion section, Bradley directed her recommendations to social work educators, advising educators to prepare students to receive effective supervision, engage in critical reflection, undertake informed job selection, and pursue advocacy for themselves and the profession. In addition, awareness of and reflection on the gendered nature of social work was discussed, given female predominance in social work generally and in her research (9/10 of her participants were

female). A follow-up study was planned contrasting two children's services workplaces, taking into account the perspectives on induction and supervision of the practitioner, the supervisor, and the senior manager.

Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (2007) compared Texan child protection workers who continued working in child protective services with those who left their employment within their first year following an initial six-week training program. Note that the participants were not all new social workers, but were rather new to child protection services in Texas. However the majority were early-career human services workers, with an average of 2.2 years of social work experience. Only a portion of the sample had degrees at the bachelor or masters level in social work—28% of the 1,881 respondents. The researchers found that the perceived role of the supervisor was key to retention, with current and former employees differing at the statistically significant level in their reported perceptions. Current employees were more likely than former employees to rate their supervisor as having facilitated their learning and as having supported their enthusiasm for their work. Additionally, current employees were more likely than former employees to report having the prescribed reduced caseload. The authors recommended that child welfare workplaces need capable supervisors who are able to respond to the emotional nature of the work, graduated transitions to full work responsibilities, and appropriate training for new workers.

Csiernik, Smith, Dewar, Dromgole, & O'Neill (2010) investigated the impact of a new worker support group in a child welfare agency in Ontario, Canada. Recognizing high turnover among new social workers and the need for more social support for new workers led to the development of an eight session support group led over a six-month period by two senior non-supervisory workers, which focused on providing support, encouragement, and practical

information. Of the 20 social workers that attended the group, 13 participated in the research. It is not clear from the article whether all the participants were new social workers in addition to being new to the job.

The social workers who previously completed child welfare placements were less anxious about agency protocols prior to starting employment than the social workers who had not, and the former also had a decrease in their anxieties about working with clients and meeting their own personal expectations for themselves after starting work. In contrast, the social workers that had not completed practicums in child welfare had an increase in anxiety about working with clients after starting work, while anxiety about meeting their own personal expectations for themselves stayed the same. The authors suggested the need for agencies to consider whether new social workers without previous practicum experiences in child welfare require additional supports on starting employment.

A large proportion of the participants experienced critical and traumatic events during the course of the support group, including verbal threats and physical assault. The exact proportion was difficult to establish due to a lack of clarity around the definitions of critical incidents, and it was unclear whether some of the events occurred as part of, or external to, workplace responsibilities. The impact of these incidents on the social workers included changes in eating, sleep, and overall health, as well as decreased social contact for eight of the thirteen workers. Social supports, including friends, family, supervisors, peers, counsellors, and the new worker support group were also used by the social workers to cope with the stresses they were experiencing. Further research on this type of support group would be beneficial with a larger sample size and clarification of the nature (work-related/personal) of critical incidents to extend this exploratory study.

As discussed in the previous section, Manthorpe et al. (2013) completed a mixed-methods study that included a focus on the induction and supervision of first and second-year English social workers. They found that the majority of their social work participants (82%) reported receiving supervision at least monthly, with a substantial focus on case management oversight. Those who reported receiving supervision at least biweekly were more likely to report a manageable workload, better worker conditions, and higher engagement with their jobs. We cannot assume this relationship is causative; that is, we do not know if biweekly supervision leads to these outcomes or if workplaces that can accommodate biweekly supervision are different in some way that influences the other factors. Additionally, the social workers perceived that supervision helped them to practice competently and to effectively manage their workloads, while its impact on coping with stress and managing boundaries was less helpful.

Thematic analysis was used to identify some perspectives of direct social work supervisors; unfortunately, this analysis does not present a coherent framework for understanding the input of this group, with unresolved divergence on the perceived ideal frequency and focus of supervision with newly graduated social workers. As the authors themselves noted, the primary purpose of the interviews was to include the perspective of direct social work supervisors working with new social workers—a perspective they identified as neglected. However, the divergence is nonetheless fertile in understanding the complexity of supervising first-year social workers—of the 13 supervisors who were willing to specify the time frame for becoming a competent social worker after graduation, there was a split between six months and two to three years (Manthorpe et al., 2014). Additionally, the ability to properly manage a new social worker's induction, including providing a protected caseload and gradual introduction to full responsibilities, was generally felt to be limited when teams were understaffed or composed

primarily of new social workers—in the words of one supervisor, “a limited group of people supporting an even more limited group of people” (Manthorpe et al., 2014, p. 106)— as well as by the unpredictable reality of casework, wherein apparently straightforward cases could quickly become highly complex and high-risk. As key mediators of workload management, the supervisors in “limited” teams sought to “‘compensate’ for less than ideal team or service conditions” (Manthorpe et al., 2014, p. 108). The supervisors’ own memories of being new social workers (whether positive or negative) influenced their desire to be supportive to new social workers, and mentoring (formal and informal), increased supervision, and opportunities for shadowing were frequently described as part of induction (Manthorpe et al., 2014). In Manthorpe et al.’s research (2013/2014) the major contribution from the social services directors was the general opinion that their organizations were meeting the supervisory needs of new social workers, including the provision of “closer supervision” (p. 11) than that offered to more experienced workers (Manthorpe et al., 2013).

Both preparedness and induction are intimately linked to the socio-political context of practice, and this relationship is explored in Yan et al.’s (2013) study of the early practice experiences of 28 first and second-year social workers in Shandong, China. The expansion of social work services in China, announced by the Chinese Communist Party in 2006, with the stated goal of “creation of a harmonious society,” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 540) represents a “social engineering project orchestrated and funded by the state” (p. 549). Despite this national impetus, and the adoption of a standardized curriculum across hundreds of social work programs dating back to the mid 1990s, the authors described a social work context wherein “a majority of social work educators . . . have never been trained and have never practiced” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 549). Because field education is absent from the curriculum and prior to 2007 the vast majority of

graduates never went on to secure positions related to social work, “for many social work graduates, social work as a practice remains largely imaginary” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 540).

Following the 2006 announcement by the Chinese Communist Party, a goal was established to create three million social work positions by 2020, through placement in government services and funding of social worker positions in non-governmental organizations (Yan et al.).

Therefore, by the later end of the first decade of the 21st century, practicing social work became a real possibility for graduates (Yan et al.). However, several structural factors continue to “threaten the material security and professional identity of newly hired social workers” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 540): the general public has essentially no awareness of social work, the role of social work is undefined even within service systems, and social worker wages are low.

The researchers interviewed social workers who had been in their positions for less than or equal to two years, with the majority in their posts for less than six months. Thematic analysis was used to identify/construct four thematic areas. In the first theme of an Unready but Internalized Foundation, despite the absence of practice-oriented instruction or field education, the theories and social work values presented in the course of social work education were identified by participants as critical to their early practice: “the internalization of these values and knowledge, as a form of personal knowledge, indeed not only became their primary source of reference to understand the field but also sustained their involvement during the transition process” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 544). In the second theme of Starting without Direction: “Blind Leading the Blind,” the social workers evaluated their inductions as inadequate and even irrelevant, and provided by trainers who lacked knowledge of the local practice context. The social workers were left without guidance on how to approach their work, with a sense of having been “parachuted into the service unit with an assumption that they already knew their

professional roles and duties within the specific institutional context” (Yan et al., 2013, p. 545).

This confusion is mirrored in the third theme, *Struggles with Institutional Barriers: an Unsettling Induction Process*. The social workers were often placed in settings without the approval or even notification of their future supervisors, and the nature of their role was undetermined—resulting in requests that they perform nursing, clerical, and housekeeping tasks. Finally, the fourth theme, *a Distant Dawn to be Reached: A Transition Cut Short*, reflected the social workers’ ambivalence about continuing in social work, including their substantial concerns about salary and subsistence, with only five of the 28 articulating a certainty that they would remain in the social services field.

Commissioned by the Children’s Workforce Development Council and funded by the Department for Education, Carpenter et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative evaluation of the first three years of the Newly Qualified Social Worker program for child and family social workers in England in the years 2008/2009, 2009/2010, and 2010/2011. This program largely informed the subsequent introduction of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for all first-year English social workers in September 2012 (Carpenter et al.). A longitudinal repeated measures design was used for each cohort (upon beginning the program, after three months, and at one year) and while the sample size in each cohort is good (initial n = 505, 705, and 881 respectively), the response rates fluctuated across the three time points in all three groups to below 25% in some instances in the second and third data collection points. A comparison group (n=47), not enrolled in the program, was used to compare the results of the first cohort. The investigators found that participants’ self-efficacy ratings (based on a custom scale designed to measure “their confidence to accomplish the tasks set out in eleven NQSW outcome statements” (Carpenter et al., p. 6) underwent improvement over the first year, with a large effect size—while

the comparison group had statistically significantly lower mean scores for self-efficacy at completion. Role clarity also improved modestly, as did role conflict. Job satisfaction was largely high, excepting observations of the public perception of social work and compensation. The percentage of participants showing clinical levels of stress, as determined by the General Health Questionnaire was troubling—varying between 32% to 40% across cohorts and data collection points, but in each cohort increasing over the first year. However, given the high job satisfaction and improved self-efficacy rating, the authors concluded that: “while for some NQSWs, the transition to employment may be a ‘baptism of fire’ (Bates et al., 2010), this need not be the case, at least in the context of a supportive induction programme” (Carpenter et al., 2013, p. 19).

The value of new social workers shadowing and co-working with senior staff as part of induction was a common finding (Bradley, 2008; Jaskyte, 2005; Paré & Le Maistre, 2006). Indeed, “(l)earning often took the form of shadowing the immediacy of practice” (Bradley, 2008, p. 358). Supportive and warm relationships with more senior workers who supported the new social worker were valued (Bradley, 2008). Regular supervision was also critical, and social workers benefited more from supervision that included an appropriate focus on the needs and viewpoints of the social worker (Bradley, 2008). Supervision that was infrequent or limited to the discussion of cases was less helpful (Bradley, 2008). It was important to the social workers to feel that their supervisors valued their needs, treated them respectfully, and gave them positive regard (Bradley, 2008). It is important to note the divergent and evolving nature of induction practices across the studies completed, including in the United Kingdom where induction is dictated by government policy.

Allied Professions

While the literature on first-year social workers is recently emerging, teaching and nursing are allied professions with robust bodies of literature that might serve as benchmarks for social work scholars. Teaching and nursing are professions most suited for theoretical transferability to social work—given the primary preparation for entry-level practitioners in bachelor programs (rather than masters-level entry as in the case of psychologists), similarities in gender composition of practitioners, shared focus on reflexivity and praxis, and similarities in status between the three professions. Well established in both depth and breadth and spanning several decades, these corpora are rich sources of theoretical and empirical insights into new human services professionals that can in turn inform the analytical foundations of research specific to understanding new social workers' experiences. Mirroring the social work literature, there is relatively little research in the Canadian context, with most studies coming from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and (unlike social work) Australia. Like the existing social work scholarship, the first twelve months of professional practice have been identified as both a stressful transition and a preparatory phase for future professional development, retention, and satisfaction in both nursing (Casey, Fink, Krugman, & Propst, 2004; Martin & Wilson, 2011; Newton & McKenna, 2007; Scott, Engelke, & Swanson, 2008; Wangenstein, Johansson, & Nordström, 2008) and teaching (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006; Rikard & Banville, 2010). These literatures include both quantitative and qualitative studies representing diverse methodologies including: mixed methods (cf. Manuel, 2003; Rikard & Banville, 2010); secondary data analysis (cf. Scott et al., 2008); single and repeated measures survey design (cf. Cowin & Hengstrger-Sims, 2006; Halfer & Graf, 2006; Marable & Raimondi, 2007); general or mixed qualitative design (cf. Andersson

& Edberg, 2010; Blair, 2008; Casey et al., 2004; Löfström & Eisenschmidt, 2009; McCormack et al., 2006; Schoessler & Waldo, 2006; Wangensteen et al., 2008; Newton & McKenna, 2007); descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (cf. Kelly & Ahearn, 2008; Martin & Wilson, 2011; McKenna & Newton, 2008; Olson, 2009; O'Shea & Kelly, 2007; Schumacher, 2007); case studies (cf. Busch, Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001; Carter & Scruggs, 2001; Worthy, 2005); narrative inquiry (cf. Rippon & Martin, 2006); grounded theory (cf. Newman, 2010); and program evaluation (cf. Church, Croft, King, and Mangone, 2005; Kelley, 2004) across a range of topics relevant to new workers.

Nursing.

The first year of a newly registered nurse's (RN's) practice has been identified as the most difficult time in their career. (Martin, 2011, p. 21)

In the nursing literature the focus has been on diverse subjective and external phenomena including those found in the social work literature: subjective emotional responses such as stress and anxiety, isolation, lack of confidence, as well as caregiver satisfaction (cf. Church et al., 2005; O'Shea & Kelly, 2007; Wangensteen, et al., 2008;); job satisfaction, turnover intention, and retention (cf. Casey et al., 2004; Cowin & Hengstrger-Sims, 2006; Halfer & Graf, 2006; Scott et al., 2008); and induction (cf. Wangensteen, et al., 2008). Other factors and dynamics investigated have included: high levels of nurse attrition in the first 12 months (as high as 60%) (Halfer & Graf, 2006); workplace bullying and horizontal violence, including hostility towards new nurses by experienced nurses (cf. Kelly & Ahearn, 2008); new nurse socialization (cf. Scott et al., 2008); developmental stages (cf. Andersson & Edberg, 2010; Benner, 1982; Martin & Wilson, 2011; Newton & McKenna, 2007; Schoessler & Waldo, 2006); the role of preceptors

and mentors (cf. Schumacher, 2007); professional identity and self-concept (cf. Cowin & Hengstrger-Sims, 2006; McKenna & Newton, 2008); the role of collegial support and recognition from both novice and experienced nurses (cf. Andersson & Edberg, 2010; Church et al., 2005; Wangensteen et al., 2008); reality shock (Kramer, 1974) and generational and inter-generational perspectives (cf. Olson, 2009).

Particularly informative for a research agenda on new social workers is nurse scholars' insight into the readiness to practice debate, with their more critical analysis of the expectations and resources of workplaces into which new nurses are placed (cf. Casey et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2008), including interpersonal contexts (cf. Kelly & Ahearn, 2008), generational differences and conflicts (cf. Olson, 2009), and a more critical take on the expectation that nurses be ready to assume all practice responsibilities on graduation (cf. Church et al., 2005; Cowin & Hengstrger-Sims, 2006). Less of the nursing literature is government-funded than the social work literature, possibly freeing nurse scholars to adopt a more critical stance on the institutional context of practice.

Teaching.

Clearly, apart from being extremely hectic, the first year is generally the most difficult in a teacher's career. (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009, p. 814)

Education scholars have focused largely on the organizational and structural context of first-year teaching practice, including interpersonal contexts. The teaching literature therefore offers a large body of empirical and conceptual observations on which social work can draw, including insights into formal mentorship programs and other induction supports (cf. Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kelley, 2004; Rikard & Banville, 2010; Löfström &

Eisenschmidt, 2009; Marable & Raimondi, 2007); dynamics of inclusion/exclusion by teaching colleagues and the need to be recognized professionally by peers (cf. Rippon & Martion, 2006); the experiences of second career teachers (cf. Brindley & Parker, 2010; Newman, 2010); organizational environments that contribute to lack of support for new teachers (cf. Carter & Scruggs, 2001); supports needed in the first year (cf. Marable & Raimondi, 2007); factors influencing retention & attrition (cf. Manuel, 2003); and professional learning, including identity formation (cf. McCormack et al., 2006). Like nursing, early-career teachers have high attrition rates: 40 to 50% within the first five years (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). A concept in the teaching literature is particularly provocative and informative for exploration in the context of social work. It involves issues of professional hierarchy, whereby new teachers are assigned low status positions by teaching and administrative colleagues, illustrated by exclusion from decision-making, dismissal of the new teacher's ideas and contributions, pressure to conform to school norms, and occasionally, exploitative work assignments that capitalize on the unlikelihood of the new teacher complaining or resisting (Rippon & Martin, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding my thesis is symbolic interactionism, with a focus on how structure and interpretation interact to create meaning. Situating myself with regards to how I understand the process of “becoming a social worker” is necessary to contextualize my research, including the types of questions I asked my participants and how I made sense of their responses. Therefore, I am openly placing myself in the symbolic interactionism camp rather than the structural functionalism camp, as described below.

Professional socialization.

Socialization is “generally understood as a process by which one acquires the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that constitute membership in society” (Miller, 2010, p. 926). Primary socialization occurs in childhood and is thought to be durable across the life course, while secondary socialization occurs in adulthood and includes socialization into professions and other adult roles (Miller, 2010). In professional socialization, adults adapt both their external behaviours to the requirements of their new professional role, and adapt their subjective self-concept to be congruent with the role as they conceive it (Miller, 2010). For social workers, professional socialization has been conceptualized as consisting of multiple influences, including pre-socialization (primary socialization and anticipatory socialization), formal socialization (content and structure of educational courses), and practice after formal socialization (practice setting and professional adaptation) (Miller, 2010). This model implies that formal socialization is substantially completed with the social work degree, while acknowledging that socialization continues well into early practice; the latter point being congruent with literature on the importance of first-year and early-career practice experiences as a foundation for later professional development, and the first point being inconsistently supported in the professional literature (Barretti, 2004).

Multiple perspectives exist on how professional socialization occurs, with traditional models such as structural functionalist approaches focusing heavily on the role of structure and a tendency to treat students and new professionals as relatively passive recipients of a homogenous body of professional skills, culture, and norms (Miller, 2010). Barretti (2004) explained the rise of alternative theoretical perspectives on professional socialization in the 1950s and 1960s as a

response to limitations of structural functionalist perspectives: “Structural functionalism explained hegemony within professions, but not diversity, conflict, or social change” (p. 258).

Symbolic interactionism is based on the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) and views human behaviour as “organised according to the internal constructs they hold about the external world, and social construction” (Payne, 2005, p. 188). Emergent symbolic integration perspectives on professional socialization “posited a much more problematic view of socialization characterized by discontinuity, conflict, and resistance” (Barretti, 2004, p. 258). Researchers and theorists in this paradigm emphasized multiple identities, conflicts of interest, and “socializee as conscious role-playing agent in the process” (Barretti, 2004, p. 258). Barretti (2004) completed a comprehensive review of literature on the socialization of social work students and found an overwhelming (although unstated) reliance on a structural functionalist view of social worker socialization, in which the process is “neat and unproblematic” (p. 276); concurrently she found a strong over-emphasis on value internalization and incomplete and linear models of socialization. The role of social positionalities such as age, racialized identity, gender, class, and sexual orientation must be more completely investigated; in particular age and maturation level are paramount considerations (Barretti, 2004); my thesis will extend exploration of the role of some of these positionalities in the experiences of first-year social workers.

Broadly speaking, social constructionist approaches (of which symbolic interactionism is a part) acknowledge the ongoing inter-relationships between subjects and institutional structures, and position professional socialization as a two-way process involving both elements of social control and conformity and the exercise of agency by students and new practitioners in adapting to (and challenging) professional cultures (Clouder, 2003). The symbolic interactionism

approach will guide my study in my understanding of the dual influences of structural factors and personal agency in the experiences of new social workers.

Adopting a symbolic interactionism understanding of professional socialization in my study facilitates recognition of new social workers' experiences and interpretations related to diversity, situations and perceptions of conflict, and social change within the profession and social work workplaces (Barretti, 2004). By rejecting an assumption of a smooth and homogenous trajectory of social worker socialization, I remain open to multiple and competing perspectives on the experiences of first-year social workers.

Summary

Social work is a highly situated human endeavour, influenced by the socio-political contexts of the institutions, communities, and nations in which it is practiced, as well as by changing global dynamics. The extant literature examining the experiences of first-year social workers is substantively focused on the social worker/agency nexus and offers somewhat narrow attention to larger contexts of social service delivery and professional issues in social work. Overall, there is a relative neglect of wider societal and socio-political contexts of practice (three notable exceptions are the examination of nationality and first-year social workers' perceptions of preparedness by Campanini et al., 2012; exploration of the aspirations of newly graduated Hispanic and African-American social workers by Warde, 2009a; and exploration of the experiences of new social workers in an underdeveloped professional context in China by Yan et al., 2013). Furthermore, in general only circumscribed consideration of first-year social workers' active interpretations and responses to their experiences emerges in the prevailing scholarship. A dual focus on institutional structures and the meaning of experience, consistent with symbolic

interactionism, offers the potential to expand this perspective. The small body of research focusing on the subjective experiences of new social workers (a lesser focus than assessment of readiness for practice and induction schemes) predominantly comprises quantitative methodologies, with a smaller number of qualitative and mixed-methods designs. Much of the research emerged from the particular practice context of the United Kingdom, which while informing a Canadian research agenda, cannot be applied uncritically to Canada's different national social work context. By offering an interpretive, qualitative analysis of first-year Canadian social workers' subjective workplace experiences, my thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge in this area.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this thesis, I use hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the meaning of the subjective workplace experiences of first-year Alberta social workers. Hermeneutic phenomenology, with its focus on the interpretation of lived experiences, is an ideal qualitative tradition to pursue this topic. My purposive sample included nine early-career social workers from the Calgary-area in Alberta. I selected this geographic area for the feasibility of the research. I used semi-structured interviews to explore a range of topics related to the experience of being a first-year social worker with my participants. In this chapter, I review phenomenology, including differentiating the transcendental (descriptive) tradition from the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition. I provide a brief history of the philosophical and methodological development of hermeneutic phenomenology. I outline key components of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding first-year social workers, explore my own subjective positioning with regard to the topic, and discuss the limitations of the approach. Finally, I describe my research design and address trustworthiness and credibility.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Context

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying human experience. It is oriented toward understanding the essence of the *lived experience* of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 1990), and takes “into account the connections between human consciousness and the objects that exist in the material world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 43). Phenomenon has its roots in the Greek words *phaenesthai* and *logos* (Gearing, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). *Phaenesthai* means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (Moustakas,

1994, p. 26); therefore, the phenomenon is what appears in consciousness (Gearing, 2004; Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The Greek word *logos* means reason; phenomenology is therefore the reasoned study of what appears (Gearing, 2004).

Phenomenology emerged as a philosophical tradition concerned with “a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising” (Moran, 2000, p. 4). The phenomenological philosophical tradition emerged in the context of the dominance of the scientific (externally focused, objective) worldview; phenomenology’s adherents aimed to advance human experience, consciousness, and subjectivity as legitimate sources of inquiry.

Hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology.

Hermeneutic (also known as interpretive) phenomenology is epistemologically and methodologically distinct from transcendental (also known as descriptive) phenomenology. To categorize the two traditions at a very superficial level, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with *interpreting the meaning* of lived experiences and communicating the interpretation textually or symbolically, while transcendental phenomenology is concerned with *discovering the objective universal essences* of lived experiences and communicating them through pure description (Beyer, 2011; Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology is sometimes called interpretive phenomenology; I use these two terms interchangeably in this thesis.

Hermeneutic phenomenology: A brief history from Augustine to Sartre.

Hermeneutics is the tradition, theory, and practice of interpretation (Moules, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, has its roots in both hermeneutics and phenomenology. Therefore, to articulate hermeneutic phenomenology’s historical,

philosophical, and methodological underpinnings, it is necessary to present the contributions of both hermeneutic and phenomenological thinkers. The hermeneutic and phenomenological projects have long and complex histories, making it difficult to identify their starting points. The word phenomenology first appeared in philosophical writing in the eighteenth century (Moustakas, 1994), while hermeneutics as a construct was introduced in theology in the seventeenth century (Moules, 2002).

Given the scope of this thesis and the need to balance breadth with depth, I have elected to start with Augustine and end with Sartre in the twentieth century. The inclusion of these founding influences relies on Moules' (2002) presentation of the "ancestral" roots of hermeneutic inquiry; my decision to include Sartre is informed by Smith et al. (2009).

Aurelius Augustine, 354–430.

The fourth/fifth-century Christian bishop, theologian, and philosopher Aurelius Augustine had a profound effect on both Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (Grondin, 1991/1994). His work formed the theoretical basis for conceptions of the limits of language to express the inner world, the forgetfulness of language, and the relationship between language and tradition (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002).

The limits of language.

According to Grondin's (1991/1994) analysis of Augustine, the inner world, or "language of the heart" (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 35) can never be fully expressed through language; "something more still to be said to in order to comprehend the matter fully" always remains (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37). Grondin explained Augustine's assertion that this is because our

means of communication have “something contingent or material about them” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37). Therefore, our inner worlds of experience can only be expressed imperfectly. An excessive focus on the propositional component of language contributes to this incomplete expression; for Augustine, only through “embeddedness in dialogue” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37) can language come closer to expressing our inner worlds. The power of the dialogical process is a concept developed further by Gadamer in the twentieth century.

Phenomenology’s primary focus is on subjective, first-person experience; therefore, it is not surprising that later proponents of the phenomenological project took up language’s limitations for revealing the inner world. Augustine’s work had a dual influence on later hermeneutic scholars—drawing upon Augustine, it became a “universal claim of hermeneutics that one can never say all that lies in inner speech” (Moules, 2002, p. 4), but it was also recognized that “language is an instrument that mediates our relation to the world and to other minds” (Mendelson, 2010, p. 33).

Language and tradition.

Augustine’s deliberations on language included meditations on its nominalist nature in the Greek tradition, whereby language, and propositional language in particular, has a singular and technical meaning and is therefore forgetful of itself (Grondin, 1991/1994). The relationship between language and tradition, and the tradition that is carried within language, is a hermeneutic theme later picked up by Gadamer, who credited Augustine’s theological reflections in shaping his understanding (Grondin, 1991/1994).

Martin Luther, 1483–1546.

The development of hermeneutics occurred alongside the rise of Protestantism (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002). German theologian Martin Luther had significant influence on the history of Protestantism and the Christian church and on the history of ideas more generally (Grondin, 1991/1994). Although Luther’s initiatives to reform the Catholic Church “laid the basis for a hermeneutic revolution . . . one might modestly inquire whether Luther himself really developed a hermeneutic *theory*” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 40). Luther’s sole professorial interest was scriptural exegesis, and he rejected secular philosophy as an empty scholastic pursuit (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002). Luther adhered to the principle of *sola scriptura*—that is, the meaning of scripture, when read with faith and revealed through God’s grace, is self-evident—and “wielded [the principle of *sola scriptura*] against tradition and the Church’s magisterial establishment” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 40). Luther’s most significant contribution to hermeneutics may have been the rejection of authority and tradition as the sole arbiters of (scriptural) meaning; four centuries later, in the twentieth century, Gadamer returned to the idea of tradition and interpretation.

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, 1768–1834.

The German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher has been credited as “one of the first to write systematically about hermeneutics as a generic form” (Smith et. al, 2009, p. 22) and as “the father of contemporary hermeneutics” (Moules, 2002, p. 4). He advanced an understanding of interpretation that included: the goal of determining the meaning of a text through reconstructing the intention and perspective of the author (and the possibility of understanding the author’s meaning better than he understood it himself), methods of

grammatical and technical interpretation, a distinction between laxer and stricter practices of interpretation and a belief in misunderstanding as the natural state from which interpretation proceeds, and clear identification of the relationship between the part and the whole (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

Reconstructed meaning.

Schleiermacher articulated the ideal outcome of interpretation of a text as a true reconstruction of the author's intended meaning—"what we are looking for is the very thought that the speaker wanted to express" (Schleiermacher, 1809–1810, as cited in Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 68). Therefore, the best interpretation of a text is not that text's meaning for the interpreter but rather the reconstructed meaning of the text from the perspective of the author—achieved in its ideal form in an understanding of the author's meaning that is superior to the author's own. Schleiermacher understood this to be an infinite task, as Grondin (1991/1994) described: "the goal of understanding better, conceived in terms of an unreachable telos and the impossibility of complete understanding, bears witness to the fact that the endeavor to interpret more deeply is always worthwhile" (p. 71).

Grammatical and technical interpretation.

For Schleiermacher, grammatical interpretation involved finding the precise objective meaning of a text (as constituted by linguistic syntax), while technical (or psychological) interpretation addressed the special art employed by the author within the parameters of his linguistic tradition (Grondin, 1991/1994). Grammatical interpretation was therefore focused on the supra-individual linguistic patterns that shaped the text's meaning, while technical interpretation was focused on the individuality of the text's author (Smith et al., 2009).

Stricter and laxer interpretation and misunderstanding as the natural state.

Schleiermacher differentiated between two purposes and methods of interpretation—the laxer practice, which he associated with clarifying areas of textual misunderstanding (e.g., illuminating obscure scriptural passages), and the stricter practice, which assumed misunderstanding as the normal starting point against which a rigorous hermeneutics would guard at every turn (Grondin, 1991/1994). Schleiermacher's assertion of misunderstanding, rather than understanding, as the natural state was one of his greatest contributions to the hermeneutic project. Calling on the interpreter to question his own self-evident understandings at every stage to some degree foreshadowed Husserl's phenomenological attitude (although Husserl was concerned not with the author's intended meaning in a text but with letting objects and phenomena appear as they really are, untainted by the natural attitude).

Wilhelm Dilthey, 1833–1911.

Wilhelm Dilthey, a German historian and philosopher, began his study of hermeneutics after Schleiermacher's student, August Bockh, introduced him to Schleiermacher's work (Moules, 2002). Dilthey's conception of the human sciences as epistemologically and methodically distinct from the natural sciences and his advancement of lived experience as the basis for all understanding set the groundwork for the emergence of phenomenology.

The natural versus the human sciences.

Dilthey advanced an epistemological and methodological distinction between the natural and human sciences (Makkreel, 2012). The purpose of the natural sciences is *explanation* based on natural laws, Dilthey asserted, while the purpose of the human sciences (the social sciences and humanities) is to develop an *understanding* of the meaning of history and human life

(Makkreel, 2012). The human sciences involve analysis of “the more complex networks of the historical world and the actual givens of human beings” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 10) rather than the artificial abstraction of mechanistic reality undertaken in the natural sciences; therefore, the laws discovered in the human sciences will always be partial and situated—that is, the laws “will apply not to history in general, but to specific cultural systems or social organizations only” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 10). Dilthey sought to “conceptualize the human sciences as autonomous sciences and defend them from the encroachments of natural science and its methodology” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 84).

Lived experiences.

Dilthey’s focus on lived experiences was a central element of his philosophy (Makkreel, 2012). In his view, lived experiences constituted self-given reality involving thinking, feeling, and willing (Makkreel, 2012), that is, the facts of consciousness (Grondin, 1991/1994). In order for the human sciences to extend knowledge beyond our own individual understandings, they “must be rooted in the original fullness and richness of our lived experience” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 12). Dilthey’s conceptualization of lived experiences formed the basis for the later development of phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl, 1859–1938.

Transcendental phenomenology.

The German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl has been credited as “the principal founder of phenomenology” (Beyer, 2011, p. 1). Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology, an approach to understanding human experience that “has us focus on the essential structures that allow the objects naively taken for granted in the ‘natural attitude’

(which is characteristic of both our everyday life and ordinary science) to ‘constitute themselves’ in consciousness” (Beyer, 2011, p. 3). Transcendental phenomenology, meant to be a “rigorous science,” was Husserl’s response to science’s neglect of the “specifically human questions” (Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 7). Understanding Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology requires an appreciation of his theories about the life-world, the intentionality of consciousness, the natural and phenomenological attitudes, eidetic reduction, phenomenological reduction, and intersubjectivity, each of which I will discuss briefly in turn.

Husserl, who converted to Protestantism in adulthood, was the son of non-Orthodox Jews. He was persecuted in Nazi Germany, losing his professorship and access to the university library. More than 40,000 pages of Husserl’s manuscripts were rescued and removed from Germany by Franciscan Herman Leo Van Breda after Husserl’s death in 1938 (Beyer, 2011; Zahavi, 2003). Unfortunately, almost the entire first printing of a posthumously published work was destroyed (Zahavi, 2003).

The life-world.

The life-world, or *Lebenswelt*, as originally conceptualized by Husserl, is the pre-reflective, pre-theoretical world of everyday experience, and it is this world of immediate lived experience that is the focus of his transcendental phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). The life-world is prescientific, and therefore stands in contrast to the scientific world:

In our prescientific experience, the world is given concretely, sensuously, and intuitively. In contrast, the scientific world is a system of idealities that in principle transcend sensuous experience. Whereas the lifeworld is a world of situated, relative truths, science seeks to realize an idea about strict and objective knowledge that is freed from every

relation to the subjective first-person perspective. Whereas the objects in the lifeworld are characterized by their relative, approximate, and proximal givenness . . . the objects of science are characterized as relative, nonperspectival, univocal, and exact. (Zahavi, 2003, pp. 126–127)

The life-world, as the world of subjective human experience, forms the foundation for scientific ways of knowing (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2012). Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology advanced the life-world as a legitimate focus for scientific inquiry.

The intentional nature of consciousness.

Husserl wrote that all consciousness is directed, whether to real or unreal objects in the world (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Zahavi, 2003), with the exception of non-intentional “units of consciousness” such as pain (Beyer, 2011). Intentional consciousness is always attached to an object in the world: “Perception, thought, judgment, fantasy, doubt, expectation, or recollection, all of these diverse forms of consciousness are characterized by intending objects . . . the perceived, doubted, expected object” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 14). Husserl therefore asserted that to understand the nature of consciousness we must also analyze the object to which consciousness is directed (Zahavi, 2003). For example, considering the fantasy of a unicorn, we cannot fully understand the form of consciousness that is “fantasy of a unicorn” without analyzing the intended object—that is, the essence (or the horizons) of the unicorn (i.e., a unicorn is an imaginary animal; the unicorn is like a horse while not being a horse, etc.). The objects to which consciousness is directed are transcendent—more than the “perspectival and horizontal givenness of the object” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 95) as perceived or imagined by the subject. Zahavi (2003) gave the chair as an example—one cannot view the chair from the front and back

simultaneously, but nonetheless the chair's horizons include all of the possible appearances of the chair. The idea of perspectival and transcendent horizons is important in the development of the hermeneutic phenomenological project and must be considered an important influence on Gadamer's later theory on the fusion of horizons.

The natural and phenomenological attitudes.

The natural attitude is associated with everyday experience (Smith et al., 2009). The natural attitude includes many features of our everyday internal worlds, such as our preconceptions, assumptions, constructions, internal beliefs, ego experiences, biases, culture, and judgments (Gearing, 2004); and our "practical concerns, folk assumptions, and smattering of scientific knowledge" (Zahavi, 2003, p. 11). Husserl's goal was to transcend the "naivety and fallacy of the natural attitude and to move, employing the classic Greek dichotomy, from a naive *doxa* to an *episteme*, to philosophy as a 'rigorous science'" (Luft, 1998). The phenomenological attitude involves a disengagement from the natural attitude and a reflexive turn "as we turn our gaze from . . . objects in the world, and direct it inward, toward our perception of those objects" (Smith et. al., 2009). Husserl asserted that in order to objectively analyze the structure and content of consciousness, we must suspend the natural attitude; he developed eidetic and phenomenological reduction to support this "alteration of viewpoint" (Zahavi, 2003, p. 11).

Eidetic reduction.

Eidetic reduction is an analysis aimed at elucidating the essential properties of an object or experience, those essences without which the object or experience would become something other than the object or experience it is (Zahavi, 2003). For example, what are the essential qualities that make a tree a tree, rather than a different type of organism altogether? Eidetic

reduction is intended to uncover the “invariant properties” that transcend the “subjective perception of individual manifestations of that type of object” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 14). As a case in point, if I see a white tree, does that mean that to be a tree means to be white? Or is whiteness a non-essential variant of being a tree—that is, a subjective perception of an individual manifestation of being a tree?

Phenomenological reduction.

Phenomenological reduction involves the temporary suspension of preconceptions regarding the phenomena under study and is perhaps the most controversial facet of Husserl’s phenomenology. This suspension of presuppositions, called the phenomenological *epoche*, facilitates “seeing things as they appear . . . returning to the things themselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Phenomenological reduction is achieved through “bracketing” the “taken-for-granted world” (Smith et. al, 2009, p. 15) in order to study the essences of phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Bracketing is a mathematical idea, in which bracketed content within an equation is treated separately (Smith et. al., 2009); bracketing in phenomenology means to treat the natural attitude towards an object or experience separately from the phenomenological analysis so that the phenomenon can reveal itself “free of prejudgments and preconceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Subsequent philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer challenged the feasibility and desirability of bracketing in phenomenological inquiry.

Intersubjectivity.

Husserl articulated a complex theoretical model of intersubjectivity. Husserl’s conceptualization of intersubjectivity was embodied, experiential, and constitutive (Zahavi, 2003). According to Husserl, it is through our own embodied subjectivity that we are able to

recognize another's embodied subjectivity—as Zahavi stated in his analysis of Husserl, “it is exactly the unique subject-object status of my body that permits me to recognize another body as a foreign embodied subjectivity” (p. 113). Additionally, according to Zahavi's interpretation of Husserl, we each understand the Other experientially and without access to the other person's first-person subjectivity: “had I the same access to the consciousness of the Other as I have to my own, the Other would have ceased being an Other and instead have become a part of myself” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 114). This point is critical to Husserl's theory of constituting intersubjectivity; the transcendent world (i.e., the objective world) is only made available through intersubjectivity—that is:

objects cannot be reduced to being merely my intentional correlates if they can be experienced by others as well. The intersubjective experienceability of the object guarantees its real transcendence, so my experience (constitution) of transcendent objects is necessarily mediated by my experience of its givenness for another transcendent subject, that is, by my experience of a foreign world-directed subject. (Grondin, 1991/1994, pp. 115–116)

Husserl's student Heidegger also takes up intersubjectivity later in the phenomenological project.

Martin Heidegger, 1889–1976.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl's who aimed to extend the phenomenological project—“Heidegger's approach to phenomenology is often taken to mark the move away from the transcendental project, and to set out the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenological philosophy” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16).

Heidegger acknowledged Husserl as a formative intellectual influence (Smith et al., 2009), while

Husserl eventually publicly repudiated Heidegger's phenomenology, even referring to him as his antipode (Beyer, 2011). Key facets of Heidegger's phenomenology included an interpretive stance, a focus on being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), the hermeneutic circle, visible and hidden meanings, and, later in his philosophical career, the role of language—each of which I will discuss in turn. Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism cannot be overlooked in phenomenology's historical context, and so I will deal briefly with this significant shadow on the phenomenological project as well.

Interpretive stance.

While Husserl envisioned a phenomenology that would transcend the natural attitude of everyday life, including our prejudgments about phenomena, Heidegger “questioned the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretive stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world—the world of things, people, relationships and language” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). For Heidegger, one's fore-conceptions, consisting of “prior experiences, assumptions, [and] preconceptions” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 25) are brought to each new encounter. Simultaneously extending and challenging Husserl's advancement of intentional consciousness, Heidegger rejected the possibility of pure reflection because reflection, as a form of consciousness, is “intentional, and therefore never completely separated from the world” (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 414).

Dasein.

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was primarily focused on what can be:

broadly classified as individual psychological processes, such as perception, awareness and consciousness. In contrast, Heidegger is more concerned with the ontological

question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful.

(Smith et al., 2009, pp. 16–17)

Therefore, Heidegger's philosophy revived "the ontology of the subject" (Moules, 2002, p. 7). The subject of Heidegger's life work, *Being and Time* (1962/1927) is "there-being" (*Dasein*), where *Dasein* is the "uniquely situated" quality of "human being" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). Heidegger asserted that *Dasein* is fundamentally relational (intersubjective)—*Dasein* is being-with (Smith et al., 2009). Even being alone is being-with, albeit in a deficient way (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger viewed death, and the resulting finiteness and uncertainty of being, as giving *Dasein* a temporal dimension (Smith et al., 2009). Although *Dasein* is fundamentally being-with, death is significant in that it is faced alone (Smith et al., 2009).

The nature of *Dasein* presented a fundamental challenge to Husserl's presuppositionless phenomenological project—with *Dasein* involving "the inherently social being who already operates with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible particular modes of Being" (Wheeler, 2011, p. 7). In opposition to Husserl's conception of the phenomenological reduction and the phenomenological *epoche*, Heideggerian philosophy maintains that given the nature of our *Dasein*, "we are unable to completely bracket prior conceptions and knowledge—we are necessarily embedded in a historical context" (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 415). In Heideggerian phenomenology, bracketing is considered a specious project (LeVasseur, 2003). Heidegger further develops his theory on the role of pre-understanding (fore-conceptions) in his formulation of the hermeneutic circle.

Hermeneutic circle.

The idea of the hermeneutic circle did not originate with Heidegger, but it took on new meaning in his philosophy. Whereas the hermeneutic circle was previously conceptualized in terms of the relationship between the whole of a text and its parts, or between text and tradition, with Heidegger the hermeneutic circle becomes an “existential task with which each of us is confronted” (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2009, p. 15). The hermeneutic circle involves an ever-increasing development of understanding as we revise our pre-understandings in light of new experiences:

In the hermeneutic circle, we make progress toward sense and meaning by questioning prior knowledge, thus expanding into new horizons of meanings. Yet, we never fully arrive, because to arrive would merely represent another stage of pre-understanding.

Instead, each turn in the circle opens new horizons and possibilities yet resists dogmatic conclusions, because the ongoing project of reflective questions keeps the possibility of new experiences and possibilities alive. (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 418)

According to Heidegger, our fore-conceptions are necessary prerequisites to new understanding; all interpretations (and all understanding involves interpretation) flow from our presuppositions.

Appearance—the visible and the hidden.

Heidegger was interested in what it means for a phenomenon to appear—as explained by Smith et al. (2009): “to say something appears suggests that it is entering a new state, as it is coming forth, presenting itself to us—and in contrast to a previous state, where it was not present” (p. 24). This is clearly connected to Heidegger’s interpretive stance and rejection of a presuppositionless phenomenology; this viewpoint on appearance suggests we cannot view

phenomena objectively, because every time we view a phenomenon it appears anew. Heidegger was also interested in what is not made visible in the appearance of phenomena—what is hidden or concealed (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, for Heidegger, phenomenological investigation must consider both the manifest and the latent qualities of phenomena as they are revealed (Smith et al., 2009). This idea has had important implications for hermeneutic phenomenology, and suggests, for example, that phenomenologists studying accounts of human experience must be alert to both what is being said and what is not being said about an experience. This is in contrast to Husserl’s approach, in which the phenomenologist suspends the natural attitude and tries to see only what an object or phenomenon really is. A phenomenologist cannot identify what is not being revealed without recourse to his or her fore-conceptions—further differentiating Heidegger’s interest in the latent content of appearances from a Husserlian approach.

Language.

Grondin (1991/1994) observed a conscious movement in Heidegger’s work towards the importance of language in being. In his later work, Heidegger speaks more empathically of language as the “house of being,” yet his beliefs about the limits of language remain (Grondin, 1991/1994). Reminiscent of Augustine, Heidegger argued in the final words of the lecture considered to mark the end point of his thought:

it is inescapably necessary to overcome the obstacles which make such a saying [of experience] obviously inadequate. Even the saying that occurs in the form of lecture remains an obstacle of this kind. Its saying has been only in propositions. (Heidegger, 1969, as cited in Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 102)

While Heidegger gave increasing credence to the role of language in being, he also echoed Augustine's assertion that language is always an inadequate interpretation of inner experience. The importance of language in the hermeneutic phenomenological project is developed more deeply in Gadamerian philosophy.

Heidegger and National Socialism.

Accounts of Heidegger's philosophical work sometimes make mention of his Nazi affiliations and sometimes do not. While some scholars present his philosophical ideas without reference to his Nazi involvement, others believe his political activities were intimately tied to his philosophical project:

Everyone—great thinkers included—is capable of errors of political judgment, even egregious ones. However, the more one learns about the Heidegger/National Socialism nexus, the more one is ineluctably driven to conclude the philosopher himself perceived his Nazi involvements not as a random course of action, but as a logical outgrowth of his philosophical doctrines. . . . as a concrete exemplification of *eigentliches Dasein* or authentic existence. (Wolin, 1988, p. 136)

While Heidegger has been alternately held accountable and exonerated by scholars, the nature and meaning of his Nazi involvement remains controversial, especially as it relates to his philosophy. It is fairly well accepted that he was a member of the National Socialist Party during his rectorship at Freiburg University—during which time he gave pro-Nazi speeches, eliminated democratic structures within the university, and initiated an end to financial aid for Jewish students (Peters, 2009). After the war, Heidegger was investigated by the denazification committee at Freiburg University and banned from teaching until 1949; in 1950 he was made

professor emeritus (Wheeler, 2011). Scholarly attempts to exonerate Heidegger have been challenged by the absence of any clear and complete repudiation of National Socialism in his later works (Wheeler, 2011). Heidegger's Nazi involvement cast a shadow over more than Heideggerian phenomenology, tainting the phenomenological project more generally (c.f. Holmes, 1996). How are we to understand Heideggerian phenomenology in light of Heidegger's National Socialist activities? Wheeler (2011) suggested:

It would be irresponsible to ignore the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. But it is surely possible to be critically engaged in a deep and intellectually stimulating way with his sustained investigation into Being, to find much of value in his capacity to think deeply about human life, to struggle fruitfully with what he says about our loss of dwelling, and to appreciate his massive and still unfolding contribution to thought and to thinking, without looking for evidence of Nazism in every twist and turn of the philosophical path he lays down. (pp. 91–92)

While the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and National Socialism will likely remain controversial, his philosophical insights continue to influence the phenomenological project today.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1900–2002.

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was a student of both Husserl and Heidegger (Moules, 2002). His work is known as philosophical hermeneutics, which is focused on understanding and interpretation rather than methodology (Moules, 2002). Key themes in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics include methodology and the human sciences, language

and conversation, understanding and application, history, and the restoration of prejudice (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002).

Methodology and the human sciences.

Gadamer questioned whether acquisition of methods unique to the human sciences was a necessary prerequisite to the human sciences securing legitimate science status, and even whether methodology could be the sole arbiter of validity (Grondin, 1991/1994). The hermeneutic task in relation to the human sciences is therefore not to develop a methodology for correct interpretation, but to “demonstrate the untenability of the idea of universally valid knowledge” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 107). The human sciences deal with a different type of truth than the natural sciences, and are better suited to a humanistic discourse than is the methodological, objectifying discourse of the natural sciences (Grondin, 1991/1994). Moules (2002) described Gadamer’s interpretation of truth as “the event of meaning, rather than something of objectivity of repetition. To say that we uncover truth in understanding simply means that we have found a meaningful account that corresponds to experience” (p. 11).

Language and dialogue.

Language occupies a central place in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer asserted that understanding is not something possessed by the individual, but rather something that emerges through participation in “meaning, tradition, and ultimately a dialogue” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 119). For Gadamer, language and interpretation in the human sciences are understood in a dialogical, question-and-response framework because “to understand a text or an event is to understand it as a reply to a question” (Grondin, 1999/2003, p. 125). Here, Gadamer

returned to Augustine's delimitations of propositional language, in comparison to the greater expressive potential of language embedded in the dialogical process.

Gadamer devoted significant space in his writing to reflecting on the nature of true conversation, both in form and purpose. Genuine conversation, to Gadamer, does not involve competing for the supremacy of one's opinion; likewise, it is not a summative process in which one viewpoint is added to another (Gadamer, 1970/2007). The focus of genuine conversation remains on the topic, and the conversational partners hold this topic in common (Gadamer 1970/2007). For Gadamer, "genuine conversation transforms the viewpoint of both. . . . [and] involves the shared interpretation of the world which makes moral and social solidarity possible" (Gadamer, 1970/2007, p. 96). Exploring a topic with a conversational partner in order to come to a better understanding of that topic's meaning has been taken up as an interviewing strategy in hermeneutic phenomenology along with more traditional strategies aimed at soliciting experiential accounts (van Manen, 1990).

Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizons relates to both the expansion of understanding that emerges between dialogical partners in genuine conversation and the enlargement of knowledge that arises when an interpreter interacts with a text. In each case, each party (whether a person or a text) possesses its own horizon of understanding, and in a fusion of horizons, they merge to create a new, more expansive understanding of the topic (Gadamer, 1977/2007). Gadamer's fusion of horizons has important implications for interpretive interviewers, because it suggests the greatest knowledge will be created when both parties in a conversation actively contribute to creating meaning, rather than when the interviewer assumes an objective stance so as not to "taint" the findings or influence the interviewee.

Understanding and application.

Rather than approaching interpretation as a purely epistemological or intellectual pursuit, and application of interpretation as occurring after the fact (e.g., jurisprudence), Gadamer conceptualized “understanding and application as indivisibly fused” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 115). Understanding always involves “applying a meaning to our situation, to the questions we want answered” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 115). Central to the act of interpretation is the application of a past text or event to the present (Grondin, 1999/2003), an application that is influenced by tradition, history, and custom—so that application becomes an extension of the dialogical search for meaning that precedes the interpreter (Grondin, 1991/1994).

History.

As human beings, Gadamer asserted, we are deeply rooted in history—or, as Grondin (1991/1994) explained, “we belong to history more than history belongs to us” (p. 116). This means that that our knowledge of history or even of our own historical determinism is always less than the actual workings of history in our lives (Grondin, 1999/2003). When writing about the role of history in interpretation, Gadamer used the German word *Wirkungsgeschichte*, a word that has proven difficult to translate into English (Grondin 1999/2003). Grondin (1999/2003) defended “the work of history” as the best translation—“the notion of work gives us a better idea that history is active in us, works in us or penetrates us, to a greater extent than knowledge can penetrate and suspect” (p. 92).

In the human sciences, one of Gadamer’s principles of the work of history involves the historiography of the topic (Grondin, 1999/2003). Every topic or research question, no matter how seemingly novel, is part of a larger history of interpretation—“a subject, a problematic, an

interrogation will always be inscribed in a tradition, in a debate, of which we must take note” (Grondin, 1999/2003, p. 93). The presentation of the historiography of a topic is common practice in the human sciences, usually taking the form of a review of literature leading to the research question (Grondin, 1999/2003).

Prejudice.

Gadamer argued for the idea of prejudice to be restored to its pre-Enlightenment meaning, before it acquired the negative associations it carries today—that of erroneous, unjustified beliefs (Gadamer, 1965/2007). In Gadamer’s view, “prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer, 1965/2007, p. 82). Gadamer captured the importance of this concept by saying, “it is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being” (Gadamer, 1965/2007, p. 82). This insight is fertile for understanding hermeneutic phenomenology—the researcher’s ability to attend to a phenomenon and draw conclusions about it will necessarily be mediated by his or her prejudices (or pre-judgments). Consider, for example, a hermeneutic phenomenologist studying anxiety—how would he or she know to inquire about the embodied experience of anxiety unless he or she had prior knowledge (prejudices) concerning anxiety and physical symptoms? In this way, our prejudices will always shape our judgments.

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1905–1980.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre continued Heidegger’s project of existential phenomenology, emphasizing our self-consciousness and drive for meaning, which is expressed actively in the world through our projects (Smith et al., 2009); Sartre’s persistent concern with

our being-in-the world (*Dasein*) as mediated through our practical concerns (i.e., our projects) continued Heidegger's pragmatic philosophical approach to human experience (Flynn, 2011). A few key components of Sartre's philosophy are particularly informative for the hermeneutic phenomenological project: human concern for becoming over being, nothingness, the direction of perception, and freedom (Smith et al., 2009).

Concern for becoming over being.

For Sartre, human beings are preoccupied with our potential future selves, what Smith et al. (2009) described as "concern with what we will be, rather than what we are" (p. 19). Human beings are constantly in process, and "the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but an ongoing project to be unfurled" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). The hermeneutic phenomenologist is concerned with the projects taken on by human actors—projects that are "embodied, interpersonal, affective and moral" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

Nothingness.

Sartre, reminiscent of Heidegger's visible and invisible in the appearance of phenomena, was concerned with what he called nothingness, that is, the equal importance of what is absent with what is present in "defining who we are and how we see the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). If we are equally defined by the absent in existential phenomenology, the phenomenologist must consider what might be missing from any account of experience. For example, is belongingness what is absent in an account of loneliness?

The direction of perception.

We do not pursue our projects in a world that belongs only to us, and our relatedness to others shapes our perceptions of the world (Smith et al., 2009). The direction of perception is a

dual process encompassing both how the world changes as we perceive others in it, and how it changes us as we perceive ourselves being perceived within the world (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre's extension of Heidegger's concept of worldliness to include personal and social relationships, and of experience as "contingent upon the presence—and absence—of our relationships to other people is perhaps the clearest glimpse of what a phenomenological analysis of the human condition can look like" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 20).

Freedom.

Existentialism emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of human beings to choose what they will become, but this freedom is situated in the complex biographical and social content of individual action (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre's freedom is a salient reminder that human beings are subjects who actively interpret and construct the world (see also Mead, 1962).

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to First-Year Social Workers

As I have demonstrated, hermeneutic phenomenology is ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically distinct from "pure" or transcendental phenomenology. While Husserl is recognized as the originator of transcendental phenomenology (Beyer, 2011), Heidegger's existential phenomenology and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics mark the interpretive turn in the phenomenological project (Smith et al., 2009). As I will show, hermeneutic phenomenology is a fit for both my epistemological and ontological positions, as well as my subject. I will review here four key differences between invoking a position of hermeneutic rather than pure phenomenology, discuss how the differences were enacted in my research, and then address how understanding the experiences of first-year social workers interpretively may inform social work practice and professional/educational issues within the discipline.

Interpretive stance.

While transcendental phenomenology is concerned with discovering the essential structures that make a phenomenon what it is, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the *meaning* of a phenomenon. This focus on meaning leads to an unapologetically interpretive stance, a stance in which the researcher is actively and openly involved in interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon, rather than attempting to maintain neutrality or objectivity. While transcendental phenomenologists use bracketing in an attempt to contain their preassumptions, hermeneutic phenomenologists agree with Gadamer that “there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 484). Prejudices, or pre-judgments, rather than a negative impediment, are the conditions of developing further understanding (Gadamer, 1965/2007). Therefore, I did not use bracketing in order to attempt a transcendental view of my subject, but rather brought my prejudices of scholarly, professional, and experiential knowledge to the topic of first-year social workers.

Heidegger used the term *Dasein* (there-being) to emphasize the profoundly situated nature of human experience, and the relationships and activities from which experience and meaning emerge (Smith et al., 2009). Social work is a highly situated endeavour, composed of a complex web of relational, structural, practical, and axiological concerns, into which new social workers enter as full and reflective participants. This research topic requires an understanding of new social workers as *subjects*, able to reflect upon and negotiate social work as emerging practitioners, rather than as *objects* or helping technicians from whom experiential data can simply be extracted. A hermeneutic phenomenological lens facilitates this understanding, and troubles the assumption that the object and the subject can be separated; new social workers cannot be estranged from their emerging experience of social work, nor can social work be

separated from the experiences of new social workers. Husserl wrote that all consciousness is *directed*, whether to real or unreal objects in the world; from this vantage point, new social workers' experiences of social work are always *intentional*, that is, directed to social work as an object perceived or imagined in the world (Zahavi, 2003).

Adopting an interpretive stance means viewing first-year social workers (and myself as the social work researcher) as actively creating meaning, within an occupation that is highly situated. Heidegger's Dasein is therefore a much more generative construct for the experience of first-year social workers than Husserl's pre-reflective Lebenswelt.

The visible and the invisible.

Heidegger identified the need for hermeneutic phenomenologists to look for what is hidden, in addition to what is revealed, when studying a phenomenon. In order to speculate on what is hidden (Heidegger) or absent (Sartre) in an account of experience, the social work researcher needs to rely on his or her fore-conceptions (Heidegger) or prejudices (Gadamer). To do so, I brought my experiential knowledge, including my own experience as a former first-year social worker and supervisor, to understanding participants' accounts, as well as scholarly knowledge of the extant research concerning first-year social workers and other first-year allied professionals such as teachers and nurses.

Language.

The use of language is particularly important in hermeneutic phenomenology, over and above the importance it is ascribed in pure phenomenology. Although rightly recognised by Augustine and Heidegger as unable to give full expression to inner human experience, especially in propositional form, when embedded in human dialogue and genuine conversation language is

the heart of the interpretive process. In phenomenological human sciences research, accounts of lived experiences are sought and given through language, and so for the hermeneutic phenomenologist, language is the medium for sharing an interpretation of experience. Of course, language is also the medium for sharing an interpretation of human experience for the transcendental phenomenologist, but in this case the presentation of the essential structures of an experience is not owned as an interpretation. Language is highly generative and evocative when applied to understanding social work and the experiences of first-year social workers (c.f. Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). In understanding the experiential accounts of first-year social workers, while examining both what is said and what is left unsaid, I gave special consideration to the use of figurative language in experiential accounts—such a metaphors and allegories.

Additionally, Gadamer's idea of genuine conversation as co-creation of meaning through fusion of horizons suggests the interpretive interviewer need not attempt a neutral and objective position during the research interview in order to avoid influencing the participant or tainting the findings. As the “findings” in a hermeneutic phenomenological study consist of the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon, I adopted an explicitly interpretive position, including “trying out” different theories or interpretations in conversation; nonetheless, the final interpretation belongs to me as the interpreter and need not be “confirmed” by the participants—for this reason, and consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, I did not conduct member-checking.

Application.

For Gadamer, understanding and application are indivisible in interpretation. Understanding occurs when we apply interpretation to the questions we want answered. One important question regarding first-year social workers concerns their subjective experiences and

meanings associated with workplace experiences. Beneath this knowledge-based question, however, there is a problem to be solved—how can the social work profession as a whole best support first-year social workers? Therefore, understanding in research occurs not only with an interpretation of the experience and meaning of being a first-year social worker, but also with the generation of potential applications of this knowledge. While the application of findings to a problem is also common in transcendental phenomenological research, the difference is that while in interpretive phenomenology the application is part of the interpretive process and therefore explicitly part of the research process, in transcendental phenomenology the generation of applications are separate from the actual research process.

Implications.

Social work is an applied discipline with a focus on social justice, the pursuit of which is an obligation included in the Code of Ethics for Canadian social workers (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). According to Davey (2006), “understanding does not merely interpret the world but changes it” (p. xiv). Therefore, it is appropriate to include a focus on praxis in interpretation in social work research. Specifically, what do the findings and interpretations in research on first-year social workers say about social work education, organizational induction, and professional development? Madison (1990) stated “a good understanding will be “suggestive” or fertile in that it raises questions that stimulate further research and interpretation” (p. 30).

Understanding the experiences of first-year social workers interpretively has the potential to inform social work practice and educational/professional issues within the discipline in a deeper way than a non-interpretive approach. Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological

approach will allow the social work researcher to attend to what is unspoken, as well as what is spoken, and in doing so to invite the shadow side of social work back into the interpretation. Additionally, an interpretive approach allows engagement with participants in a meaningful way—clarifying, wondering, and trying out interpretations in a way that will create a broader horizon of understanding than a strictly objective approach. Finally, my own prejudices (professional, experiential, and scholarly) facilitated understanding of how to apply an interpretation; in-depth knowledge of the social work field and social work education allowed for suggestion of more specific and meaningful applications.

Research Design

Research question.

The research question guiding my study is “how do young adult, early-career Alberta social workers understand subjective feelings towards their work experiences in their first year of practice following completion of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree?”

Parameters of question.

Young adults.

Social workers represent a diversity of backgrounds and experiences with regards to multiple positionalities such as age, ethnicity, racialized identity, sex, socioeconomic status, family status, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, culture, and religion. Due to the diversity and complexity of social workers’ social positions it was outside of the scope of my study to represent all of these unique social locations and perspectives through maximum variation sampling, although I remained sensitive to the importance of these diversities in participants’ experiences. However,

it was possible to limit my sample to younger social workers who may have accumulated similar amounts of pre-qualifying work experience and be similar in developmental stage and generational cohort. Generationally cohorts have usually been exposed to the same cultural and historical phenomena (Marshall, 2011). Studies in allied disciplines have identified the important role generational differences have in the workplace experiences of novice professionals, influencing expectations, interactions, and skill-sets (Cowin & Hengstrger-Sims, 2006; Olson, 2009), while social work scholar Barretti (2004) emphasized the role of developmental maturity and age in social worker professional socialization. My study focuses on new social workers in Generation Y. Generation Y is the cohort born from 1980 to 1995 (Marshall, 2011), therefore my study included social workers aged less than or equal to 32 years. Generation Y social workers are conceptualized as young adults for the purposes of my study. Most of my participants were in their twenties at the time of interview; the twenties are now recognized as an important developmental period biologically, reproductively, socially, and occupationally, with developmental goals such as increased emotional self-management dependent on acquiring social and occupational experiences (Jay, 2012).

Early-career.

Rather than interviewing social workers within their first year of practice, I initially aimed to recruit social workers that could look back and reflect upon the experience of being a first-year social worker. This focus on reflection is consistent with the interpretive tradition. The first three years of experience has been identified as the early-career period in social work and allied disciplines (Chenot et al., 2009; Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims, 2006; Fenwick, 2011), therefore interviewing social workers still in the early-career period allowed for reflective insight

that is still in the context of early-career development. Despite my recruitment parameters, I was contacted by several social workers with more than six months but less than one year of experience, and after consultation with my supervisor, I included some of these social workers in my study (those that contacted me in my second round of recruitment). Additionally, I interviewed two participants with more than three but less than four years of experience. The reason for this decision was to ensure I had an adequate sample size from which to draw interpretations with regards to my research question.

Bachelor of social work degree.

The bachelor of social work degree is the entry-level degree for most jurisdictions in Canada. Alberta also offers entry through the diploma route or a two-year master of social work route. All of my participants had earned the BSW. One participant had also completed the MSW, one was enrolled part-time in an MSW program, and two had prior social work diplomas. Several had earned university degrees prior to the BSW (see more in discussion of sample).

Area of practice.

There were no exclusionary criteria related to area of practice; social workers in both clinical and non-clinical practice settings participated.

Methodology.

My research approach is situated in the tradition of interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology.

Lived experiences and life world.

The idea of lived experiences is interpreted differently in distinctive phenomenological traditions and by different phenomenologists. For example, Moran (2000) explains phenomena as encompassing “whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer” (p. 4). For my research, I understand lived experiences to mean the flow and meanings of life as subjectively experienced. An extension of lived experiences, life world refers to the domain of lived experiences—the pre-reflective, everyday attitude directed toward the world per Husserl (*Lebenswelt*), or “being-in-the-world” per Heidegger (*Dasein*) (van Manen, 1990). As previously discussed, my conceptualization of the life world is more congruent with *Dasein* than with *Lebenswelt*.

The essence of lived experience is understood through both structural and textual description, that is, a description of the “conditions, situation, or context” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) of the experience, as well as a description of “the meaning individuals have experienced” (Creswell, 2007, p. 237). Interpretive phenomenology as conceptualized by van Manen (1990) focuses on both the descriptive element (what is it *like* to be a new social worker) and the interpretive element (what it *means* to be a new social worker). Understanding the life world of new social workers requires more than transcendental (i.e., attempting to divine what is present without interpretation) phenomenological description. As van Manen explained, “A description may properly aim at lived experience but somehow fail to elucidate the lived meaning of that experience. In this case the description simply fails to accomplish its own end” (p. 27). In hermeneutics, “the theory and practice of interpretation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 179), we take up lived experiences as sources of information about our research topics. The goal is not to present

whole narratives of individual lived experiences, but to discern how the lived experiences open up meaning about the topic.

Limitations of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The inability to generalize from small samples to large populations may be construed as a methodological limitation of hermeneutic phenomenology, but hermeneutic phenomenologists do not make claims to absolute knowledge. The tradition's epistemological underpinnings emphasize the situatedness of knowledge, and acknowledge that understanding is highly contextual. Although I view this as a strength rather than a limitation of the interpretive phenomenological tradition, I am aware that it is constructed as a limitation within a post-positivistic worldview. The interpretive researcher must be prepared to explain and defend their tradition and claims to legitimate knowledge within research communities strongly grounded in post-positivist conceptions of science.

The strongest argument against pursuing hermeneutic phenomenology is a pragmatic one—it is extremely demanding of the researcher's intellectual, creative, and rhetorical resources. Additionally, the strong emphasis on the researcher as active interpreter (rather than “discoverer” of themes “emergent” in data) requires high levels of reflexivity, personal awareness, and a willingness to purposively access one's own prejudices when interpreting data.

Subjectivity.

Insider status.

I bring my own experiences as a social worker, social work supervisor, and former new social worker to my research topic, which gives me an insider or emic view of the topic. In interpretive traditions, this is an asset to the research and bracketing is not used. Moustakas

(1994), while identifying with transcendental rather than interpretive phenomenology, stated that the research topic should be “rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance” (p 103).

Pre-understandings/Assumptions.

In interpretive work, it is traditional to make one’s own pre-understanding about the topic explicit. I came into this work believing that new social workers are integral to our achieving our profession’s ongoing mandate for social well-being and social justice; that new social workers bring both strengths and vulnerabilities to early practice; that new social workers are deserving of special supports in the early-career stage; that the first year of social work is often tumultuous and at times distressing; and finally that young adult new social workers bring different developmental and cultural assets to early practice than their older peers.

Outsider status.

While I am an insider to social work, I am a relative outsider to Generation Y—being born in 1979 places me in the last year of the Generation X cohort. Additionally, being a PhD candidate means I have a different level of academic preparation than my participants.

Social position.

I came to social work as a young white woman. I am a third-generation Canadian with mixed ethnic heritage, including English, Scottish, Irish, and Polish Jewish roots. In many ways my social position invokes unearned privilege in my experiences, as I am white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and from a moderately religious Protestant and professional class background. I graduated and started social work practice at traditional university-leaving age (22) in a large Western Canadian urban centre. Coming to a deeper understanding of my social position, with

its attendant complex web of privilege and oppression was an essential part of my undergraduate training in social work.

Bracketing and reflexivity.

While I come to my research topic with experiences and pre-understandings, it is also inevitable that my own fore-structures about the phenomenon changed as I moved from transcript to transcript (Smith et al., 2009). While Smith et al. recommended bracketing off these new fore-structures to allow new themes to emerge in each transcript, I believe this is only partially possible; while I could view and treat each transcript as a new and individual case, the pre-understandings derived from previous transcripts informed my understanding and helped deepen my dialogue with the texts. Just as my own professional experiences informed my interview questions, each interview informed modifications and additions to questions for future interviews. Interpretive approaches to phenomenology traditionally do not utilize bracketing or *Epoche*, the setting aside of preconceptions derived from previous experiences (Creswell, 2007). In my research, I did not use bracketing in order to attempt a transcendental view of the subject, but I employed reflexive openness to allow the participants' experiences to be primary in my understanding of the subject and to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. I kept a reflexive journal to assist me in this process.

My journey to the question.

My own connection with this topic began when I commenced social work practice over twelve years ago, as a social worker case manager in home health care. My first year as a social worker was both tumultuous and rewarding. I felt significant pride about being a social worker and my commitment to the profession was strong. I increasingly built therapeutic relationships

that I perceived to be strong and effective, enjoyed advocating for my clients and their families, and felt rewarded by positive feedback from family caregivers and my own sense of my growing competence. I also built my own community of social work, nursing, and occupational therapy colleagues who mentored and supported me through my learning. At the same time, I had a number of distressing workplace experiences. Most significantly, I experienced criticism by a family member of a client, several client deaths, and a high workload.

My experience of traumatic client deaths in a setting serving primarily older adults bears further elaboration. It would be expected that for a social worker whose caseload is comprised primarily of older adults, client death would be relatively frequent. What might not be expected is the traumatic nature of some deaths of home care clients, who are living at risk in the community, from suicide, falls, or related to an unexpected hospitalization. Additionally, my own sense of not having provided enough resources (in a context of increasing resource constraint) led to my feeling at least partially responsible for these negative outcomes.

Years later, after I became a program manager, I devoted significant amounts of my time to supporting counselling staff, and quickly noticed more intense needs in new workers. Secondary traumatic stress was an ongoing issue, with all counsellors regularly hearing accounts of childhood abuse, sexual assault, and physical violence. Supporting new counsellors to develop a wider range of responses to treatment activities and to client resistance had to be combined with very active emotional support and tolerance for high levels of emotional expression by counsellors in ad hoc and scheduled supervision sessions. Helping new counsellors resolve emotional concerns related to their work and bring greater skills and tolerance to their work with clients was probably the most rewarding aspect of my job, second only to the life-changing successes achieved by some of our clients. However, I had to figure

out how to transfer my general training in clinical supervision and leadership to supporting a very vulnerable group of workers, which made me curious about the unique and specific needs of first-year social workers.

Research design.

Sampling.

To explore the experiences of new social workers, I purposively recruited social workers according to the parameters previously discussed, with the goal of accessing information-rich cases for deep insights and understandings rather than for generalizability (Patton, 2011). I used criterion sampling, whereby “all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” were included in the sampling frame (Patton, 2011, p. 238). Consistent with phenomenological methods, which typically include one to ten participants (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), I recruited nine participants for my research. I aimed to recruit participants who met the following criteria:

1. Social worker registered with the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW), including those who were provisionally registered;
2. Generation Y (born no earlier than 1980);
3. Continually employed in a social work capacity since graduation with 1–3 years of practice experience;
4. Preparation at the BSW level with no prior social work diploma;
5. BSW earned at a Canadian university;
6. Available for in-person interview at location within one-hour drive of Calgary city limits, Alberta (including urban/rural);
7. Able to participate in a one-two hour interview conducted in English.

Recruitment.

To recruit participants, I worked with the Alberta College of Social Workers, who sent out two recruitment notices (see appendix) in November 2012 and January 2013 respectively. The recruitment notices were emailed to the Calgary-area list-service of registered social workers.

Sample.

My sample consisted of nine individuals living in the Calgary area who had graduated with the BSW from a Western Canadian (Albertan or British Columbian) university between June 2009 and June 2012. They were all registered social workers or were in the process of applying for registration. They ranged in age from 23.9 to 32.9 years of age at interview (mean 27.3, median 26.2). Upon graduating with the BSW, the participants ranged from 21.8 to 31.8 years of age (mean 25.5, median 24.1). At interview, the participants had accumulated between 0.6 to 3.7 years of post-BSW experience (mean 1.8, median 1.6). All but three of the participants were under aged 25 upon graduation. Eight of the nine participants were female, and all except two were unmarried. None of the participants had children. When asked to describe their ethnic background, four identified themselves as Caucasian, one as Canadian, one as Caucasian/First Nations, one as Middle Eastern, one as secular Jewish, and one as Filipino. Five had a previous university degree, one had completed her MSW in addition to the BSW, and one was enrolled in the MSW program part-time. Two participants had prior social work diplomas but were nonetheless included in the research: one because she had not worked in between the diploma and the BSW due to poor labour market conditions at time of graduation, and one because I did not know she had a prior diploma until part way through the interview.

Starting wages ranged from \$17 per hour to \$65,000 per annum. Diverse fields of practice were represented among first and current jobs, including: provincial child and family services, not-for-profit agencies (contracted child and family services, advocacy, addictions and mental health, homelessness, health, counselling, disability services, and immigration), provincial health services (policy, medical, mental health and addictions), and governmental justice services. One participant no longer practiced as a social worker at the time of interview due to inability to sustain/secure social work employment; all other participants were employed in social work in a full time capacity. With the exception of the participant who left the social work field and one participant who completed her MSW on a full-time basis, all had been continually employed since starting their first post-BSW job. Participants had held between one and five full-time social work jobs since graduation (mean 2.3, median/mode 2). All participants were assigned a participant number.

Ethics.

My study received ethical approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Ethics Research Board. All participants provided informed, written consent.

Interviewing.

I completed the interviews in November 2012 and January–February 2013. I employed open-ended, semi-structured interviews that invited participants to reflect on both the experience and the meaning of being a new social worker. In van Manen's (1990) approach to using interviewing to inform understanding of a phenomenon, interviews can be used to gather narratives of human experience to deepen understanding and/or as a means to establish conversational partners with whom to co-explore the meaning of an experience. My research

focused primarily on the first purpose—gathering rich narratives of experience and lived meaning, i.e., *personal life stories* (van Manen, 1990). However the interviews also provided rich opportunities for exploring experiences and meanings with participants and in doing so participating in the co-creation of meaning. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. I consulted with my supervisor after completing my first two interviews, in order to gain feedback prior to completing the rest of the interviews. Subsequent to this consultation, I made changes to my semi-structured interview guide. The interviews lasted an average of one and one half hours and occurred in private locations in the community, at the offices of participants, and at the University.

Data analysis.

I recorded the interviews digitally and a professional transcriptionist transcribed them verbatim. I completed an extensive process of cleaning and enhancing the data. I went through every transcript excerpt line by line to correct any errors in transcription; edit for grammar and readability; remove dross (Burnard, 1991); and add notations to signify pauses in speech, laughter, changes in the speaker's volume (e.g., whispering), changes in tone, upward inflection, and emphasis on certain words or phrases. Although I edited for readability, I did not alter unusual patterns of speech or use of language that seemed pertinent to the meaning of the passage (e.g., referring to oneself as a “women” rather than a “woman”) or use of fillers such as “like” when these fillers seemed to indicate uncertainty (rather than a usual characteristic of the participant's general speech). This process involved multiple, meticulous readings of the transcript excerpts as well as comparing the texts to the recorded interviews through repeated listening.

To facilitate organization of the data and identification of interpretive themes, I used the coding software HyperRESEARCH. I conducted data analysis using van Manen's (1990) thematic analysis, wherein phenomenological themes are the "structures of experience" (p. 79), encompassing both the particular (this individual's experience) and the universal (the meaning of the phenomenon). Thematic analysis is conducted to capture the essence (*eidos*) of the descriptions and meanings suggested by the transcript texts. Themes are not objects within the text; rather, phenomenological themes are anchoring points of meaning, described by van Manen as "knots in the webs of our experience, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90).

In order to identify thematic statements in the transcripts, I employed van Manen's (1990) three approaches to thematic isolation: the holistic approach, wherein I explored the central meaning or significance of the text; the selective reading approach, wherein I sought statements that are particularly salient and germane to the phenomenon (being a new social worker); and the line-by-line approach, in which I examined each statement or cluster of statements for what it divulges about the phenomenon. Informed by interpretive phenomenological analysis as conceptualized by Smith et al. (2009), I analyzed each transcript individually before going on the next transcript. Looking at each transcript as an individual text before comparing across transcripts maintained respect for the idiographic nature of human experience. In interpretive work, the focus is not on looking for repetition in the texts, but for meanings that can enlarge our understanding of the topic.

During data analysis, I paid particular attention to ideas and themes that are fertile in terms of improving social work education and practice—what is helpful/not helpful for first-year social workers.

After data analysis, I sorted the themes into five large thematic areas that can enhance our understanding of the subjective workplace experiences of first-year Canadian social workers. My thematic representation of the experience of being a new social worker aimed to be as systematic as possible, with the goal of presenting the structures of the experience in appropriate depth and as a coherent whole (van Manen, 1990). Coherence in phenomenological description and interpretation is critical to good hermeneutic work (Madison, 1990)—phenomena are experienced in the life world and live in texts as integrated wholes, not as catalogues of discrete thematic elements. Good phenomenological interpretation requires that apparent contradictions are reconciled in coherent, meaningful ways (Madison, 1990).

During data analysis, my own shifting and developing pre-understandings influenced my interpretive process. These pre-understandings emerged from my social location, my academic and professional background, and my theoretical and value orientations; my pre-understandings were also developed and challenged throughout data analysis by my prolonged engagement with the data.

Procedures for credibility and trustworthiness.

Reflexivity, member checking, peer review, and diversity.

To establish the credibility and trustworthiness of my research I sought rich, textured descriptions of lived experiences and subjective meanings with my participants. In hermeneutic phenomenology, bracketing is not used and the researcher's own reflexivity is central to interpretation, therefore I kept a reflexive journal and informally debriefed with my peers as I collected and interpreted my data. Hermeneutic phenomenological investigation involves a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1977/2007) whereby the understanding created through

interpretation represents a merging of the individual worldviews of the interviewer and the interviewee. This understanding is contextual and dynamic, and both parties emerge with a revised understanding of the topic. As Angen (2000) asserted, “there is no static truth to which the results of an interview can be compared” (p. 383), and the meaning of what was discussed in the interview is open to continual revision and re-understanding. For these reasons, while participants are invited to be active dialogical partners in interview, member checking to confirm the researcher’s interpretation is not used in hermeneutic work. Likewise, while peers of the researcher can evaluate the rhetoric and persuasiveness of the written work, they lack the researcher’s immersion in the topic, and therefore cannot guarantee the credibility of the work through peer review (Angen, 2000). Peer review may be used in hermeneutic work to improve the quality of written analysis but is not a technique to ensure trustworthiness or the “correctness” of the interpretation. The idiographic nature of human experience and lived meaning is central to interpretive work and to my thesis. I used the diversity and contradictions within and in between accounts of the phenomena of being a first-year social worker to develop a fuller interpretation of the meaning of the experience.

Coherence.

The coherence of the interpretation is critical in interpretive work (Madison, 1990) and aims for much more than a catalogue of discrete thematic elements—a coherent representation of experience as lived by the participants and the larger meaning of their experiences will be presented as an inter-connected whole. Generalizability is not the aim of interpretive work, but quality interpretive work lends itself to analytical transferability.

Chapter Four: Little Girls and Bitching Up—The Intersection of Age and Gender in a Female Predominant Profession

In the following five chapters, I explore the key themes arising from my analysis of the data. I provide interpretations of: the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year social workers (Chapter Four); institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the social work role (Chapter Five); first-year social workers' fears of committing a cataclysmic error in practice (Chapter Six); the meaning of encountering one's own privilege and marginalization (Chapter Seven); and disappointments in early practice and individual narratives of transformation and idealism renegotiated (Chapter Eight).

While not explicitly a research question, exploring my participants' narratives gave rise to emergent questions of how age and gender might influence the subjective workplace experiences of first-year social workers. How do new social workers perceive their colleagues' constructions of their young age, and what role do gendered ideas play? What might be the impact of assuming a professional class occupation on this experience? Given the highly provocative terms reported as used by the participants' colleagues (little girl, bitching up), what wider hermeneutic meanings does this language invoke, and how can it inform how we understand the experiences of new social workers, and social work more generally? How do new social workers experience constructions of their young age, and how do they actively respond to, and seek to challenge, narratives that undermine their sense of competence and professional inclusion? Finally, how are first-year social workers' subjective experiences and understandings of social work situated in the context of feminized constructions of caregiving in the larger social work community? I seek to answer all of these questions in this chapter.

Intersectionality comprises the way that multiple social locations, such as age, ability, sexual orientation, racialized identity, class, and gender “interact to form unique meanings and complex experiences within and between groups in society,” (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011, p. 217) and how fluid dynamics of power and oppression shape and influence these meanings and experiences in unique ways across time, space, and institutional domain (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011). In applying this perspective, we can consider how age and gender interacted to create a unique experience for my predominantly female research participants.

“Young, *And...*”

While not a universal experience among my participants, colleagues’ reactions to their relatively young age were a concern for a number of participants. There was a sense that some colleagues used the young age of the social worker to dismiss their ideas, undermine their credibility, and generally marginalize the social worker in the work environment. Those who described this experienced it as hurtful, but did not passively accept constructions of themselves as inferior to their colleagues based on age. Participants’ strategies to manage and transform age-related (mis)-understandings that diminished the social worker’s sense of professional competence and inclusion included humour, assertiveness, proving oneself over time, avoiding disclosing age or experience level to others, leveraging the value of the BSW degree, highlighting pre-BSW human services experience, and emphasizing practice situations in which younger age was an asset. Additionally, some of my participants assessed that their young age and limited experience necessitated a deferential position with older colleagues, but gained more confidence and a sense of professional independence over their first year of practice.

It might be questioned to what degree it is appropriate for younger colleagues to need to use such strategies to establish credibility as newcomers to a profession and a workplace. That is, we might try to differentiate between how the construction of young age may be used as an attempt to marginalize young women social workers and to what extent it is a valid reflection of potentially limited life/professional experience. I would argue that equating age with life experience in a strictly linear fashion ignores the multiple positionalities, unique perspectives, and lived experience that new social workers bring to the profession. Devaluing the contributions of a colleague seems to me to be an act of marginalization, regardless of the reason given for exclusion.

Although social workers naturally gain more skills with experience in the field, there is not a linear relationship between age and professional competency. However, the idea that some of the social worker's colleagues might equate younger age with questionable competency was a theme expressed by some of my participants:

A: Did people easily accept you as a social worker or did you sort of have to sell yourself as a social worker?

P5: I had to . . . but I was also *really* [emphasis] young and I just graduated so I think I had to sell a lot of things. So being a social worker but also being young that I was still competent to do the job.

As this quote demonstrates, for Participant 5, being “really young” and a new graduate were factors that required her to prove herself as professionally capable, both in terms of her professional identity/status as a social worker and also regarding her ability to perform her job competently.

Participant 1 expressed surprise that her colleagues' perceptions of her young age and childlessness influenced their assessment of her "ability to be a social worker," specifically regarding her knowledge and understanding:

P1: . . . I'm quite young relatively speaking, compared to people that I worked with, and I think that a lot of people saw me as young and thought, how could she know anything? I think that there's a barrier associated with that and I wasn't really prepared for anyone doubting my ability to be a social worker. [laughs] So that was a little bit of a shock. . . . I think that people say, "oh she's young, she doesn't have kids, she doesn't understand what this is all about."

For Participant 1, there was a sense of shock that for some of her colleagues, perceptions of her social location and experience were more important than her academic preparation as a social worker in assessing her capacities and ability to understand the complexity of the work that was being performed. In the interview, there was a palpable sense of hurt and frustration regarding the unanticipated feeling of being so easily dismissed in the professional context.

The feeling that colleagues questioned the social worker's abilities did not extend universally to the populations served, and that in some cases, young age was even understood an asset (both to clients and to the workplace), as expressed by Participant 6:

A: Did you have a sense of yourself as having, regardless of age, unique experiences that your colleagues might not have had?

P6: Yes, not so much in my role as a medical social worker but probably in every role before and after that there's been a lot of respect for my ability to work with teens and I think part of that is just my age, that teens sometimes take more readily to someone who's closer in age to them so that's certainly been valued in most of my workplaces

‘cause it’s like oh [name of participant]’s really good with teens, [name of participants]’s really good with kids, so my age was an asset in certain ways and a detriment in others.

Being closer in age to children and teenagers than her colleagues allowed Participant 6 to establish a connection and rapport that was recognized and valued within the workplace.

Participant 5 saw both her age and gender combining to make her accessible to the population she worked with. In this context, being a young woman social worker was an asset:

A: I’m wondering what your sense is of how your own social position may have influenced your experiences as a first year social worker?

P5: . . . Right. I think maybe, *maybe* [emphasis] being a female was actually on my side. Only because most people I worked with were women although I don’t know, I don’t know. I tend to not even think about that in general because there’s so much that kind of goes into being who you are. I mean maybe, I think being younger [upward inflection] and female helped with the youth I worked with, the clients *definitely* [emphasis]. I think they felt really comfortable to talk to me [upward inflection], thinking that they probably saw me more as a peer but I was obviously very professional and I never treated them like a peer but I think that helped.

Participant 5 saw her intersecting social location (young/female) as allowing youth to relate to her more as a peer. The gender aspect of this is interesting, as she worked with both male and female youth, but nonetheless saw her gender as contributing to creating rapport and a sense of being-like-a-peer with all the youth. Participant 5’s use of both emphasis and upward inflection when exploring this topic suggests she saw being a young woman as definitely helpful to her practice with young clients, but did not unreservedly identify with the idea that in her role as a social worker, “being a female was actually on my side” more generally.

There was a sense for Participant 1 that her age helped young parents relate to her, but also that her academic preparation and values facilitated a unique relationship of mutual respect with older adults:

A: If we can start with your point about being young, and I'm wondering if you experienced that, who that reaction was from. People feeling that you were young so therefore you were perhaps not equipped to be a social worker. Clients? Colleagues?

P1: It was only the colleagues. It was never the clients. I think that if anything, my age has helped me work with a lot of clients because there were lots of young parents and so I [emphasis] felt they could relate to me.

And then we worked with a large Aboriginal population in northern Alberta, and like I said in my education there was a large focus on Aboriginal populations and the respect you have for elders, and I was very, very conscious of those things [upward inflection] and I think when I worked with older people, I felt like they knew I respected them, and so vice versa, they respected me.

That population in between I'd say 30 and 50—that I don't know. [upward inflection]

A: Again was that with clients or colleagues?

P1: I would say mostly colleagues but sometimes with clients if they fell into that 30–55 age they would maybe question my abilities.

It is interesting that Participant 1 perceived that the population of middle-aged adults, perhaps themselves least likely to face age discrimination, as most likely to question her competence; those themselves marginalized by age (at either end of the age spectrum) were seen by Participant 1 to relate well to her.

Participant 1 related her perspective on her colleague's reactions to her when she was

hired for her current position. What she experienced as a lack of respect from her colleagues was troubling to her, especially given the interpersonal challenges many social workers face in working with some service-users:

P1: When I accepted this job, my understanding from HR and from the people that work here, I think there were like 120–130 applicants and they interviewed a bunch of people and so then when I got this job there was a large reaction like, “why did you get this job? You’re 25. [laughs] Why didn’t people with so much more experience get that job?” I really, really felt like *I* [emphasis] was inadequate [upward inflection] and I didn’t really understand that because the people that were interviewing me made the decision. I mean I wanted the job so I applied for it [laughs], but I didn’t have a say in it and so that was really difficult for me because I don’t understand when people aren’t respectful of each other, and I *do* [emphasis] understand it but I *don’t* [emphasis] on some level.

Like I don’t understand how people can be in a work place and be over 30, 35, 40 and still not be respectful of each other. I just don’t understand. Especially when you’re working, I don’t know, with populations that aren’t always the most respectful *of* [emphasis] you. I didn’t understand that.

Again, there is a strong sense of distress for Participant 1 that colleagues cited her age and relatively limited experience as reasons that she was not as qualified for her job as other applicants for the position. The position she held was highly desired and many applicants sought the job. She internalized her subjective experience of the reaction to her being hired—she discussed feeling inadequate. At the same time, she resisted this disempowering assessment by questioning the appropriateness of this type of characterization by identifying the negative reactions of some of her colleagues as a form of disrespect. Interestingly, she applied her own

understanding of age and professional maturity in her resistance, expressing particular surprise that colleagues in the 30 to 40 year old age range would engage in this type of behaviour.

Participant 1's current position was not an entry-level social work job. However, she was able to leverage her social work degree in her first job to help establish credibility within her office:

A: What were your experiences of power and status as a first-year social worker?

P1: Okay. I think in the office, the first office I worked in I was one of three people, two people that *had* [emphasis] a social work degree. Everybody else had some different type of degree. So I think that really was working for me. People knew [laughs] that I had that experience but then I also had my age working against me. So I think it was a balance between being young but also having a degree and some formal training in things I was doing.

Participant 1 understood that her BSW was valued and awarded credibility in her workplace, and that she was distinguished as being one of only a few colleagues who had that background. Her BSW was understood as a form of experience relevant to the workplace. In her current job, where it was not so unusual to hold the BSW degree, she perceived that more focus was put upon her age and years of work experience.

Some of my participants resisted unwanted perceptions about their age and experience level through avoiding disclosing their age. Participant 8 spoke about the benefits of being assumed to be older than she was, and the ways that technology can prevent colleagues from making judgments based on social location:

A: Did you work with colleagues who were significantly older or younger than you and if so what was that experience like?

P8: Right, so as I mentioned when I was first hired for the first couple weeks I was definitely the youngest person. So I was twenty-five when I was hired. I think sometimes people think I look a little bit older than I am so I think people probably thought I was a little bit closer to thirty which maybe kind of helped things [laughs] but definitely there's a lot of my colleagues that are very mature in their careers and so like lots of them are, I would say fifty-five to sixty-five. [upward inflection]

Yeah and sometimes you have trouble connecting with them, right? Because they are so different. Although working on a virtual team sometimes people don't know who that voice is on the other end of the phone. . . . It's definitely standard practice to work virtually over the telephone so sometimes like I said, they wouldn't know that. . . .

A: Okay so when you say that you perceived that you maybe looked a little bit older than you were, was your age something that you perceived that it was better to keep to yourself? That it might reduce your credibility if people knew what your age was?

P8: I would say in my previous role, like the non-profit, before I came [to social work], like that was definitely my strategy [upward inflection] and so I think that kind of was embedded a little bit but as I became more confident in my skills and abilities and you know had that educational background as a foundation I became more confident and comfortable with telling people how old I was if they asked. It wasn't always something I would disclose but I think I need to be quite proud of what I've achieved given my age.

Ultimately, as Participant 8 became more confident, she began to view her age as a point of pride given her accomplishments. Also, the BSW degree provided a foundation for credibility that influenced her willingness to disclose her age. Participant 1 also noted the mitigating impact of having the BSW on perceptions of competency related to age.

Participant 9 was reluctant to share her experience level with social work colleagues from other agencies, although she quickly learned that her clients did not appear to be concerned when she told them she was new:

A: Were you treated differently than other workers in a positive or negative way because you were a first year social worker?

P9: I wasn't treated differently. I always, I think I always expected to be treated differently [upward inflection] so I was kind of maybe standoffish a bit more, hesitant to give my opinions in these meetings. That type of thing. [upward inflection] With clients I'd want to sound very confident with what I was saying and do all that and then sometimes they're like, "oh did you just start?" "Yes." "When?" "A week ago." "Oh!"

A: Busted. [laughs]

P9: Yeah and they didn't care. They're like she knows what she's talking about but I was like oh no.

A: So you felt self-conscious of that at first?

P9: Yeah

A: Or that people would have a negative perception if they knew that you were new? You worried.

P9: Yeah, yeah. So I would never tell people like, clients, I would never say, "oh I'm new here" or anything like that which is good cause they call not so often that they wouldn't know if I'd been there for six months or not which is awesome. I never mentioned, "oh I just started" but if I really didn't know an answer that's when I would throw in, "oh I'm still new I will find out for you". So kind of as a buffer if they're like I need an answer now. I do that with clients but I wouldn't do that with other social

workers that called me. So it's kind of funny realizing what I did do and what I didn't do.

A: So how come you wouldn't do it with other social workers who called?

P9: Well that's going back to my expecting myself to have all the answers right away.

A: And you felt that another social worker might judge you more harshly than a client for not having the answer?

P9: I think so, yeah. Just cause the clients I talked with and met the first couple weeks of work were so sweet and so kind and understanding and sure call me back tomorrow, no rush. That type of thing. I was like ah okay. So I felt a little safer telling, letting them know that I didn't know the answer and being honest that I didn't know [upward inflection] So I almost didn't want to show my cards to the other social workers in case they wouldn't take me seriously or look down on the program negatively.

What is unique in this quote is Participant 9's focus on how her lack of *experience* would be perceived, rather than her chronological *age*. Her experience was that her newness was not a concern for her clients, but she worried about how other social workers might perceive her, and her program, if they knew she was new to the role.

Participant 1 identified that once she had the opportunity to prove her capacities to her colleagues, her feelings of discomfort around how her age was perceived lessened:

P1: But I think, it's been my experience that once I start working with people and once—like typically the process is I'll be at meetings and I'll be pretty quiet and then I'll say something that's really smart and people will be like, oh she actually knows what she's talking about—and so that's been the process and I mean that first little while is a little bit uncomfortable.

Participant 1's perception was that, while colleagues initially doubted her "ability to be a social worker" due to her young age, they were willing to revise their assessment once she was able to share her knowledge and perspectives in a meeting. Unlike another participant (P6, see below), she did not indicate that her colleagues then viewed her as older. Nor did I get a sense from any of the participants that they perceived their colleagues to fundamentally revise their expectations of competency in young social workers. Indeed, experiencing a colleague citing a participant's age was often seen as an indirect way of questioning the participant's abilities:

A: Were you treated differently than other workers in a positive or negative way because you were a first-year social worker?

P4: I would say like negative, yes People never tell you you're young, especially not in this context, 'cause they think you're young. They tell you you're young *and*. [emphasis] It's young *and* [emphasis], young and naïve or young and something else, young and inexperienced. I don't think that people, particularly ones that have been in the field for a long, long time know how much experience is required to even get into a BSW program let alone some things like volunteer experience and all those other types of things. The amount of practicum hours that are done and so on and so they treat you almost like you are just very brand new to everything.

S: So in a way did you feel like they were treating you as more inexperienced than you actually were?

P4: Yes, at the beginning definitely.

A: So in some ways not understanding or respecting the experience you did bring?

P4: Yes, absolutely.

A: Is that something that changed as you went through your first year and you accumulated experience in that setting?

P4: I definitely think so. I think the more you . . . get to work with different people and when they see you working I think that's when the opportunity comes up that, okay maybe this person is good at what they do or maybe they're not as naïve as I thought they were or what have you.

A: You get that chance to prove yourself.

P4: Yeah, but at the same time you really shouldn't have to, you know, and that's what I felt like at the beginning. So it took me some time to warm up to some co-workers for that reason and . . . in the beginning it bothered me a bit but I think over time, I think the more people get to know you too the more comfortable they will be and I mean it's relationship building all around right.

Although Participant 4 felt that her colleagues did not acknowledge her experience (gained prior to and during the BSW), there is a sense that her own awareness of this helped her to resist internalizing the negative association she felt some of her colleagues had with her age. Like Participant 1, there is also the impact of proving oneself over time as colleagues are exposed to the new social worker's work.

Not all of my participants perceived colleagues as imposing negative age-related stereotypes onto them. A number of my participants viewed older and more experienced colleagues as positive resources for their own professional growth and development:

P9: . . . I can recall working with social workers who were in [a wider] age range and that was a little easier because you can get a lot of different opinions and input, like I liked that about [work setting]. There were a lot of different ladies in [a wider] age range

and I can get an honest opinion and get insight that they understood what I was going through and they could give me input from different life stages so to speak.

Working with colleagues in different life stages allowed Participant 9 to access diverse viewpoints from female colleagues who understood the nature of the work that she was doing, and thereby to enhance her own practice. Working with significantly older colleagues, Participant 6 showed significant appreciation for her older colleagues' knowledge, whether gained through experience in the social work field or another career:

P6: I've definitely worked with probably primarily colleagues who are significantly older than me. I was the youngest person I think by fifteen to twenty years as a social worker in my department and in my following practicum in [name of community] during my Masters I was again the youngest person by twenty to twenty-five years. [pause] I do think that that actually did affect how I saw myself, like I saw myself in a good way as like a learner and as a student and here's this wealth of knowledge that I'm going to have the opportunity to benefit from but I think because I was also treated that way I also devalued my own skill set because of my age at times [upward inflection] and since graduating from my Masters I've worked in workplaces with a more diverse age range. [upward inflection] So people that are close to my age as well as people that are significantly older than [upward inflection] me and [pause] that's actually been nice in how I viewed myself, like I feel more confident now than I did a year and a half ago when I was working in work places where everyone was significantly older than me.

A: Okay, so if I'm understanding correctly you sort of felt like because your colleagues were more advanced in age that they must be more advanced in practice?

P6: Yes and I would kind of defer to their decision making more readily than I would

now actually.

A: Was that related to their number of years of practice experience or their actual chronological age or are the two so linked that you can't...

P6: I think it was chronological age 'cause some of them were very new to practice as well [upward inflection] but there's so many things that they learned in their former careers that were very useful and applicable to their current practice. So even though they hadn't necessarily entered the social work field much sooner than I had I just still saw them as having skill and...

A: So you would still defer because of their age?

P6: Yeah, their experience in any field basically. [laughs]

It is suggestive of the importance of age in understanding the experiences of first-year social workers that Participant 6 described deferring to her colleagues even if they were also new to the social work field, due to their age and experience in other fields. While certainly a respectful position with regards to her colleague's strengths, Participant 6 extended this understanding so far as to have "devalued my own skill set." For Participant 6, her confidence grew as she moved into a workplace with a more diverse age range, and as she acquired professional experience, resulting in a sense that professional contacts now viewed her as older:

A: When you say that your age was a detriment in certain ways, did that play out in terms of how other people reacted to you or in terms of your own self-evaluation?

P6: I think my self-evaluation probably, 'cause I don't look remarkably different than I did a year ago but I was looking at myself as a learner. I was looking at myself as someone who didn't necessarily have enough skill and knowledge to be making decisions independently from consultation at *any* [emphasis] point in time. [laughs] And that's

exhausting, asking for consultation on every decision and not necessarily good for the person you're asking consultation from [laughs] but you know I don't look remarkably different. I'm wearing the same clothes, I probably look exactly the same but I've had far fewer clients who are older than me take issue with my age in the counselling situation [upward inflection] or have concerns about my age and my ability to assist them because of it [upward inflection]. I think I'm just more confident in myself and I'm exuding that now and I was exuding a sense of insecurity and anxiety and kind of like a deer in the headlights [laughs] when I was in my practicum and probably as a social worker and I think I'm presenting as more confident now so people are seeing me as older rather than younger.

Note that, as Participant 6 gained confidence and experience, her subjective experience was of professional contacts seeing her as *older* rather than as simply more competent, again suggesting that the idea of chronological age and competence may be linked with regard to new social workers.

The importance of subjectivity and fine distinctions in social location is demonstrated by the perspective of one of my older participants who self-identified as a Luddite and shared concerns about working with younger colleagues:

P2: I'm also a Luddite and I remember arguing with some of the youth and family counsellors. They wanted to have a GPS in the company car that we used to transport our clients around but it was *lost* [emphasis]. It's like, well how much do those things cost? \$120 and it just got lost and I'm like this is why you buy a map. Ten dollars at a gas station, if it gets lost no big deal and I thought the younger kids had difficulty with that viewpoint, "just buy another GPS 'cause I want one, looking at maps sucks." [laughs]

There is an undercurrent of disapproval in this quote, wherein colleagues are referred to as “younger kids” and it is implied that the younger colleagues were immature in their demands for technology.

One question that remains regards the impact of assuming a professional class occupation on perceptions of negative responses to young age among young women assuming a new occupation. It is possible that young women beginning work in non-professional class occupations might not have the same subjective experience around this issue. My participants who were concerned about this issue seemed to be particularly impacted by the marginalization of their *professional* status as expressed through questioning of their competency to perform their professional roles as social workers. This emerged in a context in which the majority of my participants were extremely proud both of their academic preparation and their identity as social workers. This may be a fruitful area for future research.

Ultimately, I did not have the impression that my participants rejected the experience and mentorship of older and more senior colleagues; in fact, their support was usually strongly valued. However, there is an implicit request, or application, in the narratives of concern of feeling dismissed: “call me colleague.” That is, there is a strong need for new social workers, regardless of their young age, to be accepted as social workers by their colleagues. This is reminiscent of the subjective wishes of first-year teachers relating to their colleagues in Rippon and Martin’s (2006) work: “call me teacher.”

Little Girls and Bitching Up: Age and Gender Intersectionality

I was repeatedly struck by the interconnections among constructions of age, gender, and marital/family status in the interactions some of my participants described with their colleagues.

Just as Participant 1 believed that some of her colleagues questioned her credibility because she did not have children, Participant 8 perceived an assumption by community members that she would be partnered and/or a mother. On the other hand, she sensed that people associated her gender with compassion and understanding and were therefore more willing to discuss challenges and barriers with her:

A: What is your sense of how your social position may have influenced your experience as a first-year social worker?

P8: Well as I think as a women [sic], as a woman, people often, I think associate that with compassion and understanding. So I think there's a sense that I was willing to listen and understand, often times it's challenges or barriers. [upward inflection] I was working in a more rural community in the south, many people assumed that I would have a spouse or a partner and/or children which was not the case.

Note that Participant 8 first referred to herself as a “women” before correcting herself and discussing herself as a woman. This could be simply a “slip of the tongue” but could also signify her effort to connect her own experiences as a young female social worker to larger constructions of women in society and in social work. That is, how she brings her social location, in addition to her unique self, to her practice. Additionally, we might speculate on the relative importance assigned to a social worker's marriage and parenting status. It is possible that younger women social workers might be asked about spouses and/or children more often because for young women, marriage and motherhood are seen as signs of maturity, acting as a life experience that might offset assumptions about immaturity for practice based on age. Are young men asked these same questions? This questions could be explored empirically in further research.

Powerful language regarding age and gender was present in some of my participants' narratives. For example, Participant 1 remembered being called a "little girl" in a dismissive way by a colleague:

P1: So when I first worked here there were a couple of people that said, "oh little girl," or "young person" and I'd say, "I'm not that young" or they'd talk to me like I was their daughter or something. I'm not your daughter kind of thing [laughs] but just being a little bit more assertive...

It is remarkable to me that, in social work, a characterization of being a "little girl" would be used to diminish a colleague's competency. Here, both the social worker's young age and female gender are being combined to dismiss her. Using this type of classification in a female predominant profession suggests lateral oppression in a relatively low-status profession, whereby some social workers use their social location (in this case, as relatively older woman) to secure higher status in the workplace. This higher status is accomplished by contrast; in this case, calling a colleague a "little girl" starkly makes the comparison. This invokes wider hermeneutic meanings. This quote suggests that the speaker saw the participant as lacking the maturity to perform her job, but other questions emerge. Who in our society has less power than a little girl? If social workers use the characterization of being a little girl in a derogatory manner, this reflects on the gendered nature of our work; we, as social workers, who should care more than anyone about the perspectives of little girls.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the exceptional is no less generative for expanding our understanding of the meaning of a lived experience than the ordinary. Therefore, while the experience of calling a younger colleague a little girl need not be wide-spread to invoke our consideration and curiosity, my own experience is that this is a phrase often bantered about in

human services workplaces. That which may at first appear exceptional, may in actuality be quite ordinary. On the other hand, I have never heard a young man referred to in a social work context as a little boy. What does this suggest about gendered ideas of adulthood and professionalism? This may be a reflection of a historical pattern whereby males became men when they established an occupational identity and could support themselves financially, whereas females became women when they married and became mothers. It is worth asking here whether unmarried young women social workers who are not mothers are seen as insufficiently experienced in caregiving roles to merit the status of adult women in the workplace, while young men social workers are valued for their professional contributions that extend beyond nurturing abilities. Using “boy” in a marginalizing way in occupations is also very real—but it has historically invoked primarily racialized, colonizing, or classist meanings (c.f. “cabin boys” as per Mills, 1998); while the dominant meaning may not be gender-based, it does serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. However, I do not think the label of boy is applied to men who are new to social work—in female-predominant professions such as social work, maleness is usually constructed as a positive difference (Williams, 1992).

There is also a sense that being a little girl means naivety or lack of understanding. This is a gendered construction of one way of being a social worker, albeit a devalued way. What about the other end of the spectrum? How might understanding and a lack of naivety, even leaning towards aggressive ways of being, be conceptualized in a gendered way? Participant 4 spoke about being told to *bitch up*:

A: What were your experiences of power and status as a first-year social worker?

P4: I think coming into this work *young* [emphasis] it feels like there's some stigma there. So like you are inexperienced, you're sort of naive, at one point I was told I needed to "bitch up."

A: What did that mean in the context you were told that?

P4: I think it meant that I needed to be a little less nice and a little more mean So I think coming into it the power dynamics between the newer workers and the senior workers, some of them have been there twenty, thirty years, and it feels like there's a little bit of, I don't know if judgment is the right word, but maybe lack of respect just initially and because I mean we're lost at the beginning. I was lost at the beginning. I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know my head from my feet. I just was lost and some people are quite supportive and others just aren't So the most power I've seen is between senior and junior workers. 'Cause initially, your team leader isn't always available to support you so a lot of the time you need to rely on your colleagues to take you out with them, to ask questions, things on the computer, how to do time sheets and that kind of thing.

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.) the noun bitch refers to "the female of the dog or some other carnivorous mammals," "a lewd or immoral woman," or "a malicious, spiteful, or overbearing woman—sometimes used a generalized form of abuse." In this context, the idea of "bitching up" seems to be most congruent with the third definition of a malicious, spiteful, or overbearing woman. I doubt that the speaker intended this meaning, and likely was advocating a stronger, more assertive, or even aggressive way of dealing with practice situations—perhaps a way of practicing that excluded stereotypically feminine nurturing approaches, seeing those styles as ineffective or invoking unnecessary vulnerabilities. However, according to Gadamer

(1960/1989), language is the medium of interpretation, and what comes to us as tradition comes to us through language: “It is not just something left over, to be investigated and interpreted as a remnant of the past. What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us” (p. 391). Therefore, language does not become new each time it is used, but carries with it the history and tradition imbedded in language (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Language also supersedes the subjectivity of the individual speaker or writer; Gadamer wrote, “The claim of language can never be reduced to what an individual subjectivity intends. It belongs to the way of being of language . . . that *we* and not just one of us but indeed all of us are the ones who are speaking” (1970/2007, p. 105). Furthermore, words carry multiple meanings with them that transcend the context of their use—“the word is never completely separated from the multiple meanings it has in itself, even when the context has made clear the meaning it possesses in this particular context” (Gadamer, 1970/2007, p. 106).

“Bitching up” applied to social work practice is a powerful idea and metaphor, and can be generative in our understanding of social work, and even what it means to become a new social worker and develop a practice philosophy. The idea of bitching up is not merely, or even primarily, an intellectual idea. The word “bitch” elicits strong emotional reactions, given its history as a highly derogatory, gendered, and even sexualized term. Use of the term “bitch” as pejorative slang appeared sometime between the 15th and early 17th century (see Hendrickson, 2008 versus Green, 2010) was initially used to imply disapprobation of a woman’s sexuality, and later came to refer more generally to broad condemnation of a woman’s personality (Green, 2010). The use of bitch came to be generally applied pejoratively towards women (both heterosexual and homosexual) and homosexual men (or men who were victimized sexually by other men) and also towards persons seen as subservient or servile (Green, 2010). In this sense,

we can understand the term “bitch” as a gendered, sexualized term used to denigrate persons or behaviours assigned low-status socially. When invoking the idea of bitching up, therefore, there is a sense of both aggression and subservience—a low-status person engaging in aggressive or unpleasant behaviour. This is not an empowering image of social work practice. Interestingly, from the 1950s onward, to be a “bitch” at something implied exceptional skill in that area, e.g., to be a bitch at cards (Green, 2010). Therefore another way of understanding “bitching up,” albeit one that has less resonance given the context, is the idea of assuming a more skilful position in social work practice.

In the context described, Participant 4 experienced being told to “bitch up” as an unsupportive response from a senior worker. She described a sense of “being lost.” There is a sense that she perceived senior workers to be reactive to new, young workers, who were seen as naïve and were therefore not respected. While some senior workers offered support to newer workers, others did not, and this reflected power dynamics in the office. Participant 4 openly rejected the idea of “bitching up,” seeing it as an inappropriate way to practice in social work. This is tangible in her explanation:

P4: Quite often I would see some of the styles that other people would have and I would say thank God you think I’m naïve because I don’t want to be what *you* [emphasis] are. I mean if you’re a senior worker and you know what’s going on and you’ve got it all together then I definitely don’t want to be where you’re at. I don’t want to bitch up because if this is what bitching up is I’m not going to go there.

Through observing the practice style of a senior worker who had advised “bitching up” (and perhaps other senior workers with whom she associated this more aggressive style), Participant 4 determined that this style was not one she wanted to emulate. As a form of resistance, she re-

conceptualized the label of being naïve positively, relative to what she saw as more aggressive practice positions.

Bleeding Hearts and Punching Bags: Feminized Constructions of Social Work

While a number of my female participants articulated a sense that, while their gender might be associated with nurturing traits (which were often, but certainly not always, viewed positively), Participant 10 explained how being female was also taken as a given in social work:

P10: I mean as a woman, I think we're all women, [laughs] most social workers are women so I don't really get benefit [upward inflection] out of that.

A: Okay so that's sort of a neutral?

P10: Yeah if anything people are not surprised, I mean if I was a male in social work probably they'd be more surprised and more interested in why *I* [emphasis] was in the field 'cause it's so unique. So as women it's just kind of, it's not surprising.

Participant 10 volunteered these comments when she was reflecting on how her own social location might have impacted her experiences as a first-year social worker. She articulated being a second generation Canadian as an asset in her practice and in her organization, because she could offer a unique perspective on what second generation youth service-users might be experiencing. However, she viewed her gender as a neutral factor in her practice, while she saw male social workers' gender as playing a positive role in their professional visibility:

P10: I don't think it's difficult for a male social worker to be that shining big star in the social work field because they do stand out.

A: They stand out because there are less men?

P10: Yes, because there are less men, so they stand out more and I think, working in the field being around mostly females all the time if there is a male in the room there's a change in energy. People pay more attention to what he says, to what his opinions are.

This is a bit different than her explanation of how being a second generation Canadian aided her practice, because she does not suggest that men are seen as knowledge resources only for working with male clients; rather, her quote suggests that she may believe men are seen as having more valuable contributions more generally. This relates to Williams' (1992) work, which theorized that being male in a female predominant profession is often constructed as an advantage (the glass elevator, in contrast to the glass ceiling).

For Participant 6, social work is marginalized compared to psychology and this is related to the public's perception of it as a feminized profession, as well as an implied degradation of caregiving work more generally. She discussed this when exploring why she eventually chose to self-identify as a therapist rather than a social worker, after experiencing different reactions to what title she used over her first year of practice:

P6: Yeah, whereas *therapist*, [emphasis] I think about language a lot more, maybe more than I should but *therapist, psychologist*, [emphasis] I mean 'ist,' *dentist* [emphasis on last syllable], *physicist* [emphasis on last syllable], like words ending in 'ist' usually tend to be pretty like highbrow professionals whereas something "worker" just kind of implies that you know someone else gives you direction and then you do it.

A: Ahhh.

P6: You know you're not the mind. I think about social work versus psychology quite a bit since I work so closely with psychologists and I'm *stunned* [emphasis] by the similarities in our programs. I thought they were much different and they're actually

very similar, like the kind of learning we do, at least what my colleagues have told me because they're treated as being quite different but I really feel like social work in the public eye is a very feminized profession [upward inflection] whereas psychology is a very masculinized profession in how they're perceived [upward inflection]. You know, this is just me speculating but I feel like people hear "social worker" or look at the words "social worker" and they imagine a woman. Whereas a psychologist is much more likely to be a man than a social worker.

A: Right.

P6: You know psychology I think we really associate it with the whole psychoanalytic tradition and Freud and Jung and you know *men in suits* [emphasis] who were just *pioneering new fields of knowledge* [emphasis] and you know really part of almost a scientific community. Whereas in social work you picture more like the loving churchwoman devoting her free time to helping the needy. You know kind of at the mercy of her emotions and you know a bleeding heart, much more than we see a psychologist as a bleeding heart. I think we see them as being more analytical whereas we see social work as being more emotional and nurturing or associated with a mother figure.

This quote is full of fertile imagery presenting a world of masculinized helpers (psychologists) contrasted against a domain of feminized helpers (social workers). In the masculinized world, ideas include: men in suits, pioneering new fields of knowledge, part of a scientific community, analytical, and highbrow professionals. In the feminized domain, notions involve: someone else giving directions, not the mind, churchwoman, free time, at mercy of emotions, bleeding heart, emotional, nurturing, and mother figure. The idea of a bleeding heart is also a class-based

metaphor; bleeding heart refers to “a reasonably well-situated member of the bourgeoisie, who for sentimental reasons of left-leaning political views, always espouses the liberal cause, whether sensibly or not” (Makkai, 2013, p. 31).

Furthermore, the idea that social work is under the direction of others reflects the idea of social work as a semi-profession. A number of female-predominant occupations, particularly care-giving occupations, are conceptualized as semi-professions (e.g., nursing, social work, midwifery, occupational therapy). Although some scholars posit criteria for distinguishing between full and semi professions, Hearn (1982) argued that what is missing from this discourse is acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the characterization, that is: “‘established professions’ are staffed, wholly or very largely, by men; ‘semi-professions’ are staffed for the major part by women” (Hearn, 1982, p. 185). Also distinguishing the semi from the full professions are the gendered functions and power relationships performed and inhabited by their practitioners, which are performed in relationship to (Hearn would argue in service of) the full professions. Hearn conceptualized professionalization as a process through which reproduction and emotionality come to be controlled by men, and cautioned that increased professionalization within the semi professions tends to be accompanied by increased control of the profession by men. Hearn presents an interesting argument that semi professions such as social work and librarianship are positioned in subordinate roles to full professions:

Social workers spend much of their time serving, that is receiving referrals from and writing reports for, medics, lawyers, the courts, even the police. Even librarianship is seen as its fullest development when serving men, in universities and other ‘places of learning.’ (Hearn, 1982, p. 192)

Some of my participants also reflected their initial ideas about idealized social work that seemed

to evoke feminized (and marginalized) constructions of caregiving. For example, Participant 10 identified her starting image of a social worker as someone who is unaffected by stressors, willing to do very difficult work for low pay, even someone willing to be a punching bag:

A: So you mentioned something that really interested me, you said “*the* [emphasis] social worker” and it seemed like you were almost talking about an archetype we have of what a social worker is. So what I would love for you to comment on is your sense, in your first year or so coming out of school, what your sense was of what “the social worker” is and what your sense is now.

P10: “The social worker” *then* [emphasis] was not afraid of social change, was so passionate to the point where stressors just *don’t* [emphasis] stress them out, don’t bring them down.

A: So almost untouchable by stressors because they’re so fuelled by passion?

P10: Right, right, untouchable by stressors. Also very [long pause] willing to do very difficult work for low pay. [laughs]

A: Oh dear, okay.

P10: Just I would say willing to take anything they get, by anything I mean anything from difficult participants to yeah just very—punching bag [upward inflection]—, but someone very strong and willing to take it on with that bleeding heart.

A: So self-effacing, like where the needs of the self are subordinated to the cause or to the participants?

P10: Right, the cause, very good way to put it. Yes, very much about the cause.

A: So all about the cause even to the expense of—

P10: self.

Participant 10 later talked about revising these ideas over her first year of practice. Interestingly, she stated she initially applied this view of the ideal social worker to both male and female social workers. Initially, she explicitly saw the ideal or archetypal social worker as self-effacing and willing to subordinate the self. Used metaphorically, a punching bag can be understood as a person who is “constantly beaten up” (Green, 2010, p. 362) and “someone who takes much abuse and punishment” (Hendrickson, 2008, p. 681). It is potentially dangerous for new social workers to be internalizing these constructions of social work, not only because willingness to have one’s boundaries breached is not sustainable over one’s working life, but also because as a value position it implicitly accepts oppressive conditions. The commitment of the social work discipline to social justice needs to include the self, and young social workers ought to be encouraged not to accept marginal compensation, abuse, or mistreatment as a natural part of their working conditions.

In summary, first-year social workers enter into a complex world of practice and organizational context that is deeply gendered. Many of my participants were surprised to be assessed by others on the basis of their social location, rather than only their acquired academic preparation and professional status of “being a social worker.” The ways in which social location was taken up in the workplace reflects the ways in which social work has been conceptualized as a “women’s profession” and its subsequent, relative low-status, as well as ideas about the general occupational/professional credibility of young women (particularly unmarried young woman who are not mothers). Making these dynamics visible is critical to the discipline’s social justice mandate; by bringing gendered ageism in social work out of the shadows, we can try to challenge and overcome it, and in doing so affirm the value, dignity, and equality of all of our colleagues.

Chapter Five: In an Office in the Basement: Occupying Undervalued Space

Social workers do not work in isolation, but rather within larger systems of care and in collaboration with other service providers. Additionally, many systems of care in which social workers practice are not predominantly staffed by social workers, nor is the provision of social work intervention the only or even primary service offered. Both medical and educational social work are examples in which social work is not the principal professional group. In this chapter, I offer a perspective on how first-year social workers in non-social work predominant systems may be marginalized by structures both within and beyond the organizations in which they practice, and how first-year social workers may make sense of and respond to these dynamics.

Hospital social work is uniquely positioned in a medical model of care. In many hospitals, social work is viewed as an ancillary service rather than a primary component of patient care. The placement of social work offices away from patient care areas reflects and reinforces this secondary status, and sustains a dynamic whereby social workers respond almost exclusively to referrals from health care providers rather than requests from patients and families. In effect, medical social work comes to exist in service to the requirements of health care providers rather than the self-identified needs of service-recipients. Office location within the hospital also sends a message about the value of social work services, one that Participant 6 internalized:

P6: . . . it's not something we ever could have managed but I thought wouldn't it be nice if I actually just had like a tiny little closet of an office on or near the units that I work in so that clients could *elect* [emphasis] to come see me [upward inflection]. My office was in the basement right beside photocopying and the laundry [upward inflection, laughs]. So our pagers didn't even work down there [upward inflection]. So I felt very isolated

from the actual people that I was supposed to be working with . . . it means there were so many barriers to clients electing to come see me on their own. Like they had to ask *permission* [emphasis] for me to come by or I would have to intrusively pop in right after they've [undergone major life event] and, "hi, doing this on my schedule, not yours." [high voice] So there were lots of ways in which I was thinking, "oh, we can't help this cause I'm not the most important thing in the hospital and I get that" but it just seemed like there were other ways we could set it up so that clients could be more empowered.

I found it troubling that this participant seemed to accept the undervaluing of her role suggested by her placement in the basement, which she also referred to later in the interview as "the dungeon downstairs," where even her pager would not work, saying, "I'm not the most important thing in the hospital and I get that." Another perspective would be that her work is critical to the well-being of vulnerable patients and their families, and that she deserved access to a work space that would facilitate her activities as a primary part of holistic patient care. This would also lessen the role of medical personnel as gatekeepers to social work services—patients would not need to ask *permission* to access the support of the social worker. Part of what the participant is encountering here as a first-year social worker is a disconnect between the medical model of care, whereby access to services is facilitated by an expert provider, and a social work model of care, whereby clients need the opportunity to connect to resources independently. Also, she seems to accept the idea of social work as less important than other patient care functions, wishing only for a "tiny little closet of an office on or near the units that I work in." Wishing for a closet is almost like trying to be as unobtrusive as possible—fitting oneself and one's work into a space that is normally reserved for holding items not currently in use. Participant 6 was also acknowledging the lack of space on medical units, however this is only one factor influencing

the practice of social workers working off-unit. Other options to ensure patient access to social work services on unit include shared and rotating office space.

Participant 6 questioned, in general, the value of what she could offer as a medical social worker. What is remarkable to me about this is that she described an example of her work with a family where it seems likely she made a unique and deep impact that would likely span generations (facilitating planning and support around an adoption). Despite this evidence of exemplary practice, and fulfilling a role unlikely to be assumed by other members of the health care team, she came to prefer clinical practice because she saw herself as having more to offer:

P6: I think having had the experience of being in clinical practice [upward inflection] which I was partly attracted to because I felt like well then *I* [emphasis] will actually have a service I can offer people . . . because I can't promise people the system is going to help them [upward inflection] but if I can help people with skill-building stuff, with coping skills, with navigating their mental illnesses, well I know I can do that to a point. I know I can't promise, "yeah, you're bipolar, won't be a problem now" [high voice] but I know that I can at least assist them in building some capacity and so I feel better about this role because I feel like I'm actually offering people something and I didn't feel like I had much to offer as a medical social worker actually.

Part of this participant's preference for clinical practice was her sense that her ability to make an impact was not dependent on the overall functioning and responsiveness of larger social service systems, as she felt it was in the resource broker component of her role as a medical social worker. Interestingly, the services she felt able to offer in clinical practice related to facilitating the development of individual psychosocial skills, rather than the provision of concrete (daily living assistance) or social supports. This reflected her feeling of disappointment in social

services more generally. I would also like to draw attention, however, to her last statement: “I didn’t feel like I had much to offer as a medical social worker actually.” Her disappointment in what systems of social welfare could provide (or not provide) to her clients resulted in a sense that the way to be effective was to focus on individual-level intervention. Her own inability to secure needed resources for clients as a medical social worker connected to her occupying another undervalued space—the space of ally to the marginalized.

There is a dual meaning here to the feeling of not having something of value to offer. Firstly, working in a dysfunctional social service system (underfunded, disorganized, and structured around separating the “deserving” from the “undeserving”) can leave social workers feeling disempowered along with those they are trying to assist (c.f. Mullaly, 1997). Feeling unable to connect clients with needed resources can lead to a sense of having nothing of value to offer.

Secondly, there is the issue of social work’s secondary status in the medical setting. As Participant 6 observed, “certainly I was still subservient to the medical professionals, just not as much as I expected.” This subservience may be much more about structural and systemic dynamics (e.g., the location of the social worker’s office) than about interpersonal relations with medical personnel. Participant 6 was surprised to find nurses supportive of her work, as she expected to have negative interactions with nursing staff. Perhaps trying to prepare her for the reality of feeling undervalued, her preparatory education in social work actually inoculated a fear of another female predominant, sometimes marginalised, profession. In situations of conflict between social workers and nurses, we have the unfortunate situation of creating adversaries between those could be allies:

P6: You know I felt like I had been taught to *fear* [emphasis] nurses in [social work

Faculty] sometimes there's a lot of animosity between the medical professionals and social workers but there wasn't in my workplace. I came in *expecting* [emphasis] to be low man on the totem pole [upward inflection] and that did me more harm than anything. So I don't know if it was necessarily the Faculty that taught me that, or maybe just things said by people in my practicum, or maybe it was something I brought in myself, but I definitely expected to be mistreated by medical professionals.

A: But you're not quite sure how that message was communicated to you or how you came to believe that?

P6: I know some stuff came up in seminar . . . well-meaning people wanting to prepare you that inter-disciplinary practice can be difficult sometimes, sometimes people will assume that you don't have skill and you don't have knowledge . . . but I think in people trying to prepare me for the worst—which I could have walked into and that would have been good to have expected that—I was expecting the worst and I did myself more harm that way because I *felt* [emphasis] like I was low man on the totem pole and I think that I really could have felt a lot more confident in my role than I did for probably the first month.

Note that Participant 6 worried she would be “low man on the totem pole” in relation to her medical colleagues. The idea that position on the totem pole reflects status invokes a colonial misunderstanding, in which hierarchical ideas were misapplied to a different cultural context. In actuality, lower position on the totem pole is not indicative of lower status (Jonaitis & Glass, 2010). What is important here is how a colonial worldview, deeply steeped in ideas of hierarchy and status, comes to dominate the institutional landscape of medical care, and therefore strongly influence the experiences of first-year social workers in this setting. The focus is not on

interpersonal collegial relationships, but rather on how hierarchy is communicated and maintained through institutional means.

The educational system, like medical services, is operated along hierarchical lines. Social workers in schools also work alongside another female predominant profession (teachers) who may, like nurses in hospitals, be perceived to have more influence in the workplace due to their numerical dominance. Participant 5 perceived that as a social worker coming into the educational system, there was an assumption that she would operate under the direction of senior educators such as the guidance counsellors, rather than as an independent and qualified professional in her own right:

P5: So in my position I saw power more through the lens of a system. So what I experienced was the school system has a ton of power and they operate very power over, power over parents, over students and over any other system which included the mental health system, non-profits, collaborating with them is very difficult. So I'm still quite jaded about the educational system based on that. So I experienced that. I didn't get that from immediate co-workers who worked within the project [upward inflection].

I actually thought we felt, I felt very much like we were all equals [upward inflection] and we could collaborate together like just our small team and that was actually really kind of a good experience [upward inflection] but again like with the guidance counsellors and other educational staff very much power over and I *felt* [emphasis] that...

A: Okay and how related do you think that was to you being a first year social worker?

P5: I don't know. It's so hard for me to say, probably the first six months I didn't see it as a big deal cause I thought I'm new, I just graduated, just give it some time, let them get

to know you it's fine, but even after time, even looking back now I think it had nothing to do with it. I think it had more to do with being a non-educator or non-teacher.

A: Okay so being a non-teacher coming into the school, there was an assumption you would fall under the authority of that system? As opposed to representing a different system or a different set of values.

P5: Exactly and I felt like maybe the social work, whether you want to call it the social work system or whatever, was not as valued and it didn't have a lot of pull or status.

This dynamic was expressed in a number of ways, one of which was being left to supervise a suicidal student while receiving no communication from educators regarding the plan for the student's safety:

A: What about an experience that was particularly stressful or challenging for you?

P5: So what was stressful was, *I* [emphasis] had my [suicide intervention] training, and I knew that the guidance counsellors did not.

So there was one student I was told that she might be at risk. So [a guidance counsellor] brought the student in and I talked with [the student] and after talking with her, realized she wasn't as at risk as the guidance counsellor thought. We came up with a bit of a safety plan and so then my thought was that she was just going to stay in my office for the rest of the day instead of going to class, that was fine. And then without me knowing the guidance counsellor had called the police to handcuff her and take her to the hospital. So what was stressful was first of all for the student cause to me that was not a proper process that should have happened and then it went behind my own professional judgment. You know without even consulting with me. So that was really hard for me...

My feeling was that they needed just to put her somewhere for a temporary amount of

time and I was available, my office was available. So I felt used a little bit...

I definitely did not feel valued. And I think if we want, like talking about social work, I felt like they didn't see being a social worker as someone competent to provide that type of skill.

Working together with other professionals in complex situations involving risk to vulnerable persons requires ongoing communication between providers. In this situation, Participant 5's colleagues supported her frustration but acknowledged the right of the guidance counsellor to act according to her own judgment as the *in locus parentis*. From a systemic perspective, there was no further discussion or negotiation about how the guidance counsellor and the social worker might work together to support students more collaboratively in the future. Participant 5, in retrospect, felt she might have approached her colleague more assertively after the event to discuss approaches to intervening with suicide risk. In a system in which there is limited exposure to social workers, colleagues might not know what the professional capabilities of social workers are. In these situations, it might be left to the first-year social worker to educate colleagues about their role. This is a difficult task for a new worker, especially in a hierarchical system in which they may be seen, as Participant 5 reflected, as "less professional, less qualified."

Participant 6 recognized that social workers might not routinely advocate for themselves, and saw this as reflecting the need to value our work more; she encouraged new social workers to advocate for themselves and see their time as valuable:

P6: . . . [I recommend that new social workers] advocate for themselves as workers because I don't feel like we're necessarily good at that, and then to encourage their colleagues if they feel comfortable to advocate for themselves as workers too, because I'd

love to see us value ourselves more [laughs] as a community. Even just saying my time is worth something and so I *should* [emphasis] be properly compensated for it and I *shouldn't* [emphasis] be working a lot of unpaid overtime and I *do* [emphasis] deserve my vacation time and I *do* [emphasis] deserve health benefits. I feel like because we do practicums instead of [paid work terms] we're so used to working for free that there's almost guilt when we start making money for it.

Participant 6's own doubts about her contribution as a medical social worker ("you know I'm sure there were probably certain people who didn't view it as useful or valid and there was even times I was clearly questioning it but I think I was very surprised by the respect that a lot of my medical colleagues had for it") led to a sense that her colleagues were doing work that was more valuable than she was...she expressed guilt about drawing professional wages, comparing herself to clients with much lower and even inadequate incomes. I asked her about how she would understand her wages in relation to her nursing colleagues, who were likely compensated at a similar level as herself, and she expressed a differential understanding of the value of her nursing colleagues' work and right to professional wages:

P6: I don't know that I ever considered it actually. I think I felt like they would for sure deserve [professional wages] because they were literally doing things that can physically save lives.

And I think maybe again that's just internalized hierarchal stuff because we have valued medical professions that way for so long. Whereas social work is kind of the baby profession and it hasn't been around as long. Whether or not we've succeeded is very hard to determine sometimes [laughs], like did I help that person or were they going to get there on their own? Whereas with a nurse it's like yeah actually we're coding so it's

really good you were there [laughs], like they definitely would have needed external help in order to do that and we can tell that their signs of basic life are better now so...

A: So it's very concrete and easy to assess in that sense.

P6: It's very concrete and it's *not* [emphasis] concrete with social work so I think that's part of where the self-doubt comes in too.

Measuring the success of psychosocial interventions, beyond treatment for mental health and behavioural disorders, has proven elusive across human service disciplines. Firstly, what should be measured? It is the nature of involvement in human systems that the intervention goals of each person, family, or community are unique. Secondly, the idea of measurement reflects the encroachment of the methods of the natural sciences into the human sciences—a dynamic, that while facilitative at times, can also be constraining in understanding the impact of psychosocial interventions, due to emphasis on reduction, standardization, and generalization, emphasis that might restrict rather than expand our conceptualization of intervention in human systems. In fact, it may be easier to measure the “system’s” goals for social work than to measure those of clients and families—system goals such as reduced recidivism or shorter hospital stays. Finally, it may be difficult to measure the impact of a social worker’s intervention, as it is usually a systems intervention—that is, it involves assessing, activating, and utilizing a wider system of supports. There will always be limits in what the individual social worker can do in the context of orchestrating a larger system.

How can a new social worker respond to ambiguous work, whose value is difficult to quantify, and may be marginalized by larger structures as a lower status profession? Participant 6, who had completed both the BSW and the MSW degree, alternated between self-identifying as a “social worker” and as the higher status “therapist”:

A: Would you say that choosing to identify as a therapist instead of as a social worker is a form of class-consciousness?

P6: Yeah it is. I don't defend it. I think there's a lot of value in saying, regardless of how you are going to perceive me I'm going to assert that I'm a social worker because I believe that my behaviour and my practice speaks for itself, and I think that my practice can elevate the status of the label social worker, and I'm fine with you doubting me for a little while until I prove myself. But then I get lazy and I get sick of people looking down on me when I could easily just say, "I'm a graduate of a graduate faculty and I'm a therapist" and immediately people perk up.

Participant 6 vacillated between what she saw as the more difficult position of self-identifying as a social worker (with its attendant need to prove herself) and self-identifying as a therapist, which gave her (instant) credibility. Here, there is recognition that there is wider societal understanding and respect for psychotherapy, practiced by graduate-prepared therapists from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, over and above the other interventions performed by social workers at both the BSW and MSW level.

Social workers employed in systems in which they are the numerical minority may face both systemic marginalisation and lack of collegial awareness about their role and capabilities. Negotiating these dynamics requires confidence and assertiveness that may not come naturally to first-year social workers that are learning to navigate new roles. Additionally, trying to arrange services for a client and being limited by what resources are available can lead to a sense of not having something to offer, as can the ambiguous nature of psychosocial intervention. In this context, relationships with other female predominant professions can be challenging as elements of systemic hierarchy position workers against each other, vying for influence and recognition.

Navigating these dynamics can be challenging for first-year social workers, especially as they may feel limited in their ability to work across ideological lines (see Chapter Eight).

Chapter Six: “Ruined Forever”—Fear of Career-Shattering Error

Fears of failing, making a mistake, or being seen as incompetent are likely common among those new to a profession. These kinds of fears ran through the interviews with my participants, but the fear was not always making a mistake, per se, but rather making a cataclysmic error that would result in total failure and even ruin. There was also an undercurrent of fear about losing the role of social worker—and a related idea that being a social worker is a precious, fragile thing, intrinsic to the first-year social worker’s self of sense. Working with human beings is often ambiguous work, where what the “right” action is changes from situation to situation, requiring flexibility and judgment. This very changeability leads to vulnerability, as Videlock’s (2013) poem “Bane” captures:

Full of strength and laced
with fragility:

the thoroughbred,
the hummingbird,
and all things
cursed
with agility.

The vulnerability of working in a profession where the answers are not always clear is greater for newer practitioners who have not yet accumulated the practice wisdom that often informs difficult decision-making. First-year social workers will not always have the answers immediately, but that can bring a sense of self-doubt and fear of failure:

A: Did you have any fears in your first year as a social worker?

P8: Fear that I wouldn't *know* [emphasis] the *answer* [emphasis], definitely.

A: What would you say was your greatest fear in your first year as a social worker?

P9: I was worried I would mess up or wouldn't have all the answers [upward inflection].

The belief that one will be expected to “have the answers” suggests more than novice anxiety—it is a reflection of the influences of positivism and capitalism on social work. In a positivistic worldview, answers are objects; in a capitalist system, knowledge is also an entity for possession. New social workers may internalize the idea that they are meant to experts, even though they hold the (perhaps conflicting) idea that they are allies entering into a collaborative helping process. From a hermeneutic perspective, knowledge is continually being co-created, and while the social worker may not “have” the answers, they can participate in navigating, recreating, and co-creating answers that create great well-being for individuals and communities. In social work, the answers are usually ambiguous and in flux, and skilful social workers may become experts in finding and negotiating answers, rather than possessing them. Participant 5 recommended that first-year social workers offer themselves patience:

P5: I felt like I kept failing [upward inflection] maybe it's about giving yourself *time* [inflection] and patience that you'll learn, even though you have your degree that doesn't mean you have to know everything right away

Social workers play a considerable role in helping service-users to navigate complex institutional systems in order to meet their needs. Additionally, social workers provide psychosocial assistance to clients and families dealing with multifaceted challenges. Given these realities, it is perhaps not reasonable to expect that a first-year social worker will feel confident in all practice scenarios immediately after completing the BSW—as Participant 5 suggested, there is a need to

continue to learn on the job.

For some new social workers, the fear of making a cataclysmic error invokes considerable anxiety, and suggests the fragility of the new professional role:

A: What about any fears that you had in your first year as a social worker?

P6: I was very concerned a lot of the time that I was going to damage my reputation in the community by having some sort of misstep especially working in [name of city]. It's a smaller community and so . . . I knew a number of people just from my past roles so I had some good networks down there. I was really worried that, you know kind of feeling like a fish out of water in this new role, that I was going to do something *wrong* [emphasis] and then my reputation was going to be ruined forever and I was never going to be able to come back from it and I would be unemployable and not trusted by clients or other professionals.

For this participant, there was considerable fear of doing something “wrong” that would have calamitous results—effectively ending her career as a social worker as well as her good standing in the community. Potentially compounding anxieties about making mistakes, a number of my participants seemed to have very high expectations for their own beginning practice, and what they should be able to accomplish in their professional roles—even leaning towards a sense of being personally responsible for clients' well-being or for larger circumstances they could not reasonably control. Initially, participant 9 felt concerned she would not be able to solve her clients' problems; she later understood that this was not possible within a one-hour session:

P9: I remember when I started I was worried that people would come in with problems and I wouldn't be able to solve them but then as I've been working just for this past six months I've come to realize you can't solve every single problem in a one hour session.

You're human too.

Participant 9 adjusted her expectations of herself, a process that is necessary in the first year of practice as novices determine what is achievable in their work and what is outside of their control. Social workers practice in complex human systems in which competent practice does not always guarantee positive outcomes. For first-year social workers, maintaining a strong commitment to the welfare of those receiving services can morph into feelings of responsibility for conditions outside of the social worker's realm of direct influence. Participant 6 struggled with her role in a family where two apprehensions took place due to unforeseen safety concerns:

P4: So for me it was a family that I was working quite closely with and I had just returned the children home [upward inflection] and only a month later to apprehend them again, to remove them again [quieter voice]. So it was difficult cause of the children and I'm seeing them under those circumstances but it was also difficult because I felt like I had *failed* [emphasis] them [upward inflection].

For this social worker, there was delicate line between strong empathy and self-recrimination. Eventually, self-censure gave way to an understanding that she was not responsible for the safety concerns in the home, but nonetheless, memories of the events continue to trouble her:

P4: I was really just *heavy* [emphasis], like I just felt my heart, my chest felt heavy and you just feel *sad* [emphasis, upward inflection] because as much as you put the child's safety first and so on, you also build a relationship with the child and you build a relationship with the family and having a particular soft spot for children myself and having been around children forever and ever it's *hard* [emphasis] to see kids in that situation. I mean they are crying and you know like they don't want to go and they don't get it and it's really hard

Even now [six months after apprehension] we have to see the kids once a month and every time we see the kids I think of *that time* [emphasis] and it's *hard* [emphasis] because I mean it's not our fault and that type of thing and it isn't but at the end of the day we had something to do with that child feeling that pain and that sorrow and that feeling of being ripped away from their family.

First-year social workers may encounter emotionally distressing situations that are unique to their roles, such as situations involving harm to children. First-year social workers may feel too vulnerable to tell colleagues or managers that they are struggling. Novice social workers might feel that discussing their challenges could result in questions about their competency—that their very professionalism might be at stake:

P4: I just find you want to be a professional, you want to be strong, you want to continue on with the work and you don't want to put yourself in a position where it's like I don't know if I can do this? Cause quite often that's what de-briefing is. It's, particularly in the circumstances, I don't know how long I can do this for or if this is something that's for me and to be able to comfortably be able to say that to a colleague or a supervisor is quite a challenge.

The responsibilities associated with social work are often high. Add social work's humanitarian and social justice mandate to the day-to-day demands of the work, and first-year social workers might struggle to know when their professional obligations are satisfied. This can become problematic if personal well-being is compromised, or if the social worker has set a standard of professional involvement that is not sustainable. Participant 5 held a part-time position in addition to her full-time job in her first year of practice, and identified performing her full-time job did not feel like she was doing “enough”:

A: What made you want to take on additional work when you're working in the day? . . .

. Did it help sort of build up your confidence, or? [pause]

P5: I think it did and I think I felt being a social worker we have to help people *all*

[emphasis] the time. [laughs]

A: So what does that mean, helping people all the time?

P5: For whatever reason I thought working thirty-seven to forty hours a week was not enough. That I should be doing more.

Overall, first-year social workers may experience considerable anxiety about assuming their new professional roles—apprehension that is influenced by the ambiguous nature of the work, ideas borrowed from positivism and capitalism, unrealistic expectations, and difficulties in determining when one's professional commitments have been met.

Chapter Seven: Encounters with Privilege and Marginalization

Oppression involves the dynamics by which dominant groups in society acquire and maintain unequal power/influence, status, and access to resources through the marginalization of subordinated groups (Mullaly, 1997). Privilege entails the unearned benefits one derives from membership in a dominant group—for example, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class. Degree-prepared social workers represent many social positionalities, including both oppressed and dominant groups. For some first-year social workers, analysing their own experiences of privilege is part of becoming a social worker, as is accepting their social location as reflecting no merit on their own part. However this understanding of privilege has both positive and negative features—positive aspects include increased empathy, commitment to social justice, and skills in building authentic relationships, while negative aspects include personalization of structural issues, a sense of differentness from clients that may not enhance solidarity, and guilt about compensation. Finally, personal experience of marginalization may enhance the first-year social worker’s confidence in their capacity to respond empathetically and knowledgeably to diverse populations.

Coming to an understanding of one’s own social location, including issues of privilege and oppression, is typically part of completing the BSW degree. Participant 1 identified this process as critical to being a social worker:

P1: . . . your first semester is a lot about social location and where, how you were placed in this world and the privilege or other things that came along with your location in the world. I think that that really made me learn to critically think and taught me how to really question things and I think that for *me* [emphasis] is what a large piece of being a social worker is. Questioning and saying, “why are these assumptions here? Why do we

judge people because of this? Who gets to decide? Why do people have these underlying beliefs?”

Additionally, Participant 1 developed awareness that her personal positioning in a relatively advantageous social location was a matter of chance, and reflected no merit on her part:

P1: I didn't chose to be born into a white privileged home where I was always told I could do whatever I wanted to do. I could have just as easily been born into a home where there wasn't enough food to feed me and so I was sold into human trafficking and then forced to service men who could come and visit me without any social consequences.

For first-year social workers, awareness of their own privilege and the oppression of service-users may be deeply unsettling. Participant 6 struggled with the economic privilege she experienced as a professional class worker compared to working-class clients:

P6: I know that when I was working as a medical social worker I felt bad that I was having that much money coming in, and especially because you know we work with people who are working very hard at low paying jobs who don't have that money coming in. So it's like what am *I* [emphasis] doing that I allegedly deserve this money that this very hard working mother of three who manages a [fast food restaurant] doesn't deserve. You know for the work she's doing she's not being properly compensated in a comparative way but then I just have to remember you know there are people out there who are working just as hard or less hard than me who are making even more money and you know if I go over to the business building there are some people there who are going to make *significantly* [emphasis] more money than me and they might not work that much harder than I do. So I think just remember that other people make lots of money so

it's okay for you to make lots of money too.

While Participant 6 struggled with her own economic position, in that it was superior to those she worked with who demonstrated similar industry in lower-paid positions, she rationalized that social workers themselves make less money than those in business occupations. It seems like a first-year social worker might relieve feelings of guilt about having more economic resources than clients by comparing themselves to others whose economic rewards are much higher than their own. The nature of social workers' roles often bring them into frequent contact with marginalized persons, as Participant 6 discussed regarding working with working-class families experiencing poverty. A structural perspective might lead to questions about the underlying institutional and societal dynamics that create and sustain marked economic inequality, and suggest solutions for its eradication. However, the first-year social worker encounters this inequality at a *personal* level rather than an abstract analytical/institutional level and may extend their significant sense of responsibility to clients (see Chapter Six) to personalization of (i.e., feeling personally responsible for) service-users' economic realities. For example, when working with low-income families who struggled to meet basic needs, Participant 6 felt guilty about spending money on travel in the face of unmet client needs:

P6: I think that social workers work more primarily with people that are low-income than lots of other professions. Everyone gets sick so [medical professionals] are going to meet everybody . . . Whereas I just met the people who might not be able to meet the needs of their baby and that's often low-income.

I went to Europe for a summer—I was very fortunate—and studied art and I remember thinking with the money that I'm spending on this trip what could I do for that family that I work with? So am I really spending this money on myself when I could buy all those

kids new clothes and they wouldn't have to wear hand-me-downs to school. I could replace their carpet, it's worn out. We could get rid of the mice in their house! Maybe my exposure to people who are lower income, the frequent level of exposure has a lot to do with that too.

Social workers can use techniques from structural social work to address societal inequalities and oppression, but these types of intervention are unlikely to yield immediate satisfaction of very real and pressing client needs. First-year social workers who personalize the economic oppression of their clients are in a very difficult and conflicted situation because (as the participant in the previous example undoubtedly knew) the poverty of those with whom a social worker has a professional relationship cannot be resolved by the use of the social worker's own resources to remedy needs that are not being met by our systems of social welfare; practically, the needs are too great and far-reaching, and ethically, issues of fairness and undue influence would arise.

Intersectionality influences the dynamics of oppression and privilege. For Participant 9, her non-racialized identity, her marital status, and her social class were painfully apparent to her when working as a social work student with a racialized, impoverished woman accessing services for domestic violence. Her sense of unearned privilege was symbolized by her diamond engagement ring, which she sought to hide from her client:

P9: In my practicum, I was watching an intake that my supervisor was doing and I found myself turning my engagement ring around to hide my diamond because we're sitting in [name of shelter] and this lady you know, you look at her and you just see hurt and pain and she's missing teeth and she's got bruises and she just looks so down. So I'm sitting there in the corner, you know, blond with my nice work pants on and I turned my ring

around so she wouldn't see my diamond and I was like why did I do that? But it's because I felt my power as a white woman with an engagement and she's talking about how men in her life have always hurt her and here I am sitting perfectly happy newly engaged just feeling complete guilt...

There is the potential for a breakdown in solidarity between a social worker and a client if the social worker is preoccupied by guilt and a sense of differentness from the client. The social work student was acutely aware that her own social position was one of markedly less vulnerability than the client she was engaging with. However, the student could be a victim of violence too—white, professional-class women in marriage relationships are also impacted by violence against women. So while there is the potential for solidarity as women there is also a sense of “otherness” in that the client's dejection and injury and powerlessness are compared to the social work student's own sense of personal and social well-being. If maintaining a balance between understanding of the ways in which privilege separates and the ways in which solidarity connects is challenging for all social workers, then it is potentially even more difficult for new social workers.

Guilt involves ideas of culpability. First-year social workers are not personally responsible for structural dynamics that create unearned privilege or the oppression of others but feel guilty when they understand they have reaped unearned benefits in a society that claims to be a meritocracy. Learning that our society is less meritocratic than they might have believed challenges the first-year social worker's sense of worth, so that even earned privilege (e.g., a salary) becomes suspect and discomfort around both earned and unearned privilege may undermine the social worker's ability to advocate for what they need in the workforce (e.g., an office space on the hospital ward). Ultimately, the markers of professionalism such as a

professional salary may unsettle first-year social workers in a way that other first-year professionals do not experience.

However, this same personal and structural understanding of privilege and oppression can create both empathy and a commitment to social justice:

P1: I also think how much my degree taught me about my social location and how I could so easily be somewhere else and I didn't get to chose so I might as well give my best to people that didn't get to have the best hand in life.

Likewise, through her first-year experience Participant 6 came to a deeper understanding of the consequences of oppressive features of social service systems, and what it meant for her not to have been a service recipient herself:

P6: I'm very lucky. You know I don't have my *entire* [emphasis] adolescence transcribed in a database somewhere the way a child who's grown up in the system has. It's not their fault they grew up in the system but we know every single bad thing that they ever did, *every single time* [emphasis] they ran away from home, *every single time* [emphasis] they were rude to their foster parent, there is a record of that. Can I imagine what it would be like if there was a record of every time I was rude to my poor mother while I was a teenager [laughs] or I did something that I shouldn't you know. I would never be allowed to redefine myself as an adult who is polite to her mother.

And just even the social diagnoses that goes on so often when people become involved in those systems that are so oppressive, like well they were a child in need and we're already judging that they'll be deficient in some of their parenting skills. Well they're in the system, they were a child in need.

And I'm so lucky I don't have that and maybe my parenting skills are even worse than

theirs would be. I don't know. So I just, it reminds me how lucky I am to not have been involved in a system that's very unforgiving.

And how lucky I am to have come from a family that fortunately was very supportive too. We assume people have supportive families and they often don't.

Talking openly about perceptions of privilege may help build relationships with clients:

P4: I try to be aware of my privilege and my position before going into something [upward reflection] and so just the position of case worker holds a lot of power and I think with that comes a lot of privilege and having been educated and continuing with my education So I try to definitely be aware of it and sometimes I just lay it on the table because sometimes there's just this barrier and it feels like you can touch it and sometimes you need to do something really crazy that nobody expects you to do. You need to put it all on the table.

A: So what would that look like? What would you say to a client about that?

P4: I had a meeting with a family, the parent is just very resistant to my work and continuously just said oh, "I know you guys make a lot of money" and I said, "no, we really don't." So those types of things are challenging. I think people's perceptions about you and oh, "you just think you know it all." No, I don't. I just finished university and actually I've only been doing this job for so long so I'm learning every single day. So putting all those things out on the table and just being honest with people and see just because I have a university degree doesn't mean I think I know how you should raise your kids. Those types of things, so constantly just bringing it back to the human aspect of it and I'm not here as an educated government employee and so on. I'm here to look at how we can support your family and that's my role here. My role is not to be this

educated person who takes home this much money every month and that type of thing.

So I mean sometimes you just need to be blunt and so far I found that it helps a little bit.

Social identity is complex and continually being reconstructed. Participant 7 had early experiences of persecution and also of being seen as an “other” in her first Canadian community, where she arrived as a refugee. She does not identify as being “white” or coming from a middle-class background, but she is aware that that is how others perceive her until she discloses her background. She has found her ability to connect to others’ experiences of marginalization through her own experience is an asset to her practice, but she has also been exposed to racist and anti-immigrant comments. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that the invisibility of her difference means she receives some of the unearned privilege that is associated with being seen to be part of the dominant group:

P7: I was a refugee and came to Canada as an immigrant and I’m Jewish but I look white and affluent. So I get to blend. I get to explain aspects of myself to people as needed, to my benefit in the sense that they can see that I understand in a way that they might not think that I would.

It’s been like that my whole life, cause I look white and I sound white and so I’ll have people say really racist things to me as though I should agree. And then I’ll be like, “but why would you say that about immigrants, I’m an immigrant.” With my refugee clients I told them that I was an immigrant and they’re like, “oh,” so they know that I have an idea or you know being Jewish and being Aboriginal there’s a lot of commonalities there. So I use it to find common ground.

Visibly I get a lot of privilege but I think I get a lot of privilege as well from being, from having like an [pause] understanding of what it’s like to be different. To be the

other, to not have a mainstream upbringing and I think that is a huge benefit, like I think I have an understanding on a deep way but at the same time I get to walk with all this privilege of being white and middle class and educated and da, da, da, da.

I think it's a very valuable perspective. In my heart I don't feel "white", like I grew up in northern Alberta and I was totally an outsider [pause] but I really treasure those experiences now cause I think it, whatever it is that you do to understand another person's perspective, like whatever that avenue is, is really valuable.

Participant 4 also identified how her own experiences as an immigrant from a war-torn country, being an ethnic minority in Canada, and having experienced poverty add to how she can understand her clients:

P4: I think having some here as an immigrant and having worked with people from diverse ethno-cultural culture backgrounds, having experienced my own personal struggles and struggles with my family. Also come from a country that's been war torn for many, many years. So I think having exposure to that really, I think my compassion is quite different and having a bit of an international piece and sort of at least the slightest understanding of what people who are coming to a new country experience and challenges associated with even just being an ethnic minority, living in poverty and those types of things. So I feel like I bring a different sort of compassion.

Encounters with privilege and oppression are commonplace for first-year social workers who work with marginalized persons. Although uncomfortable at times, these experiences have the potential to broaden and deepen social work practice. However, first-years social workers might be particularly vulnerable to dynamics such as personalizing structural issues and would likely benefit from support to reflection upon these experiences.

Chapter Eight: “My Job Was Making Promises I Knew the System Couldn’t Keep”—

Macro and Mezzo Level Disappointments in Early Practice

Many of my participants experienced profound disappointments with the system and culture of human services—both within their own workplaces and when interacting with larger systems of social welfare. Within their own workplaces, they were disillusioned to encounter colleagues they perceived as burned-out, unethical, or judgemental of services users. A number of my participants did not feel prepared for interacting with colleagues whose perspectives were very different from the social work values they were exposed to in their BSW. Many workplace environments were also disenchanting and experienced as politicised, unfriendly, and dysfunctional. Meeting the shifting needs of bureaucratic systems could be disempowering and not conducive to client-centred practice. It was particularly difficult for some participants to interface with a larger system of services that did not meet the needs of service-users, and to communicate lack of access to clients with very real and pressing needs. Despite these challenges, my participants found ways to actualize their social work ideals in real and often conflicted agencies, through creative and individual means. Ultimately, there was a process by which idealism was renegotiated so that values and praxis could be united in actual work environments. In this section, I will first explore the meaning of the disappointments my participants experienced, and then the ways in which they reconciled these significant challenges to create a new way of practicing that was both consistent with their values and realistic in action.

Some of my participants were distressed by behaviour by colleagues that they assessed as unethical. Participant 1 was distressed when a colleague made a highly derogatory comment to her about a client whose children had different fathers.

P1: So I'm thinking, *how, how* [emphasis] is this possible. These people are so vulnerable, they've been judged by so many people, and now they're here trying to access services, trying to do something different, how can you be working with them and have that mentality.

Even if you don't say that type of thing to someone that's accessing services you still said it to me and it offends me and so I addressed it with the manager and the manager said, you know what, I forget what the expression was, I'm just a stone's throw away or something to the effect of I could be on this side of the counter just as easily as I'm on this side. So that behaviour has to stop.

. . . I think people probably told me this throughout my degree that once you get in the workforce people are going to view things differently and there's lots of people who are burned out and lots of people that aren't that nice anymore . . .

It is clear from Participant 1's intonation that she was shocked by her colleague's behaviour (*how, how* [emphasis] is this possible). This experience was impactful enough that she offered up the idea of being prepared for burned out colleagues as advice to first-year social workers, emphasizing that first-year social worker should "not lose sight that that's not acceptable behaviour for anyone." Participant 1 also reflected on working with colleagues who did not have a social work degree, and her concern that some of her colleagues did not have appropriate understanding and empathy for structural factors that impacted client's challenges:

P1: I felt least prepared for practice by—

So in British Columbia where I went to school and spent most of my life, in order to be a social worker you need to have a social work degree, or if I wanted a position in a hospital I would need to have an MSW, whereas in Alberta the regulations are a little

different and there's lots of people that are registered social workers that don't have a social work degree.

So for me there was a large difference in what I'd learned in school—the program I went to was very conscious of Aboriginal people and how they're disproportionately represented in so many fields that social workers work in—and I think that that education prior to coming made me think that everyone I would work with would have the same kind of information and be on the same level, have the same level of compassion and empathy and that they understood that maybe people don't have the skills to parent, they were never taught those things and so that's the reason why. Their children are stuck in this system, maybe that's the reason why they're not showing up to their appointments, because no one actually ever taught them that this is important.

But I really feel like I learned that in my social work degree. Definitely one of the things where I felt unprepared was working with people who didn't have the same type of understanding or empathy.

Regarding these types of dynamics, if she could give advice to first-year social workers,

Participant 1 reflected that she would:

P1: . . . explain to them that you know there's some people who have been in this field for a long time and they don't have the same type of awareness. I think I would also say make sure you take care of yourself because *I think* [emphasis], and this maybe not fair for me to say, but I think that sometimes people lose their passion or stop being as compassionate because they see a lot of stuff that isn't fair. *I don't really know that* [spoken very quietly].

Again, Participant 1 is returning to a concern about the impact teammates experiencing burnout

have not just on clients, but on their first-year social work colleagues, in that they are providing an undesirable example of practice philosophy.

Participant 10 found that some of her colleagues who were not social workers did not share her understanding and perspective of confidentiality:

P10: Confidentiality is *huge* [emphasis]. So the experience that I've had in non-profits is that the staff comes from so many different backgrounds and degrees. Right now I work in [a small office] and no one has the same two educational backgrounds. I think social work's where I was *prepared* [emphasis] in the realm of ethics and you know what's okay and what's not okay and I think my co-workers, a lot of them don't have that background [upward inflection]. We work with participants and so you know it's difficult not to talk about those participants [upward inflection], however I don't think they're as aware of what is ethical in terms of chatting about a client in a public setting or even what's appropriate to share with a co-worker and what's appropriate to share with a supervisor.

Participant 10 used creative means to navigate these challenges with her colleagues such as using humour and emphasizing her accountability to the social work code of ethics and practice standards when she was asked to breach confidentiality. This is a benefit of being part of a regulated profession:

P10: Not that anyone who is unregulated is completely unethical but I think that there's just more of an awareness of it if you are a social worker and if you are regulated and if you are registered there's that onus there, there's something that you are accountable to, that code of ethics, that status that you're accountable to, accountable to as well as there's

a body out there who could, I don't know if crackdown is the right word but who could you know take disciplinary action

Participant 10 had the sense that unregulated human services workers might not have had the same exposure to training in ethics as she had had, and they were not accountable in the same way to a code of ethics and a regulatory/disciplinary body.

However, the need for colleagues to understand the social worker's ethical obligations also applied to teaching colleagues, who are also regulated professionals with ethical responsibilities relating to confidentiality. Participant 5 wanted her teaching colleagues to know she was a registered social worker and accountable to a regulatory body, so that her need to protect confidentiality would be respected:

P5: It wasn't social work specific in terms of the qualification for the job but to me it was very important that people saw it that way. Partly because I needed teachers to understand I had a college too, like rules per say to follow, in terms of confidentiality. Because they sometimes wanted me to break that confidentiality and I had to you know try to explain that part of it

A number of my participants did not feel they were prepared by the BSW to work in settings in which social work was not the dominant professional perspective. They expected both workplace dynamics and the norms for client work to reflect the social work values that were propagated in their degrees. When there was a conflict between worldviews or professional perspectives, some of my participants did not know how to negotiate these differences.

Participant 5 articulated this as being preparing to "work with a bunch of social workers":

P5: In terms of job preparedness I think [the BSW program] taught you very, very well how to work with a bunch of social workers but it did *not* [emphasis] teach you how to work with a bunch of non-social workers.

I guess in more of an idealistic way. So it was all, it was very much about this is the ideal world and we want to teach you how to advocate so we can achieve this ideal world where there's equality and where you know people's finances are taken care of etc., etc. and then when I got to my job sometimes my hand was slapped for advocating.

A: So when you say it was teaching you to work with a bunch of social workers, do you mean that it was encouraging a particular way of looking at the world that was idealistic? And not necessarily giving you the skills to negotiate conflicts around that worldview once you were practicing?

P5: Yeah, exactly. So maybe how to negotiate or compromise the perspective. In what ways can you compromise the social work perspective?

I think it was, maybe what it was is it prepared me to work with clients very well but it did not prepare me in collaboration with inter-professional practice and that I would have liked to have known more about.

First-year social workers might not feel prepared to resolve ideological inter-professional and intra-professional conflicts related to their work. For Participant 5, there may have been an initial belief that advocacy would be welcomed and accepted as a course correction in a context where most providers shared the same perspective on client care. What she discovered is that the perspective on social work she acquired in her social work degree was not actually dominant in the human services. She was therefore not advocating for a course correction but actually advocating for a change in orientation to care. Many of my participants were surprised and

disappointed to learn that the social work values and perspective learned in the BSW were not the dominant perspectives in their workplaces, regardless of whether social workers were the numerically dominant professional group. This is related to numerous factors such as how human services functions systemically (see later in this section) and hierarchical models (see Chapter Five on occupying undervalued space).

For Participant 5, the social work curriculum did not promote critical thinking in that a simplified, idealistic worldview was emphasized, perhaps at the expense of academic material, which was “watered down” and not as rigorous as her prior undergraduate liberal arts classes. What Participant 5 wanted was more information on how to advocate for clients in systems where others may hold different worldviews, and when and how she could be flexible with her perspective without compromising who she was as a social worker. This strikes me as a need for a more dynamic and practical pedagogical approach to teaching client-centred and social-justice oriented social work, that recognizes first-year social workers will not only work with other social workers, and even where they are numerically dominant they will work within systems of care representing multiple and conflicting perspectives.

Discussions that involve worldviews and professional perspectives can be related to fundamental ideological differences between individual workers and between groups of professionals. Participant 8, in addition to hearing jokes about being “the girl from the left coast,” recounted being labelled as a Marxist by a colleague, a description she did not identify with:

P8: I got called a Marxist one time at work by a colleague.

I think [my colleague] was having trouble understanding why I was thinking the way I was. So like in terms of program planning and strategic design and we're talking about

access to programs and services and a lot of that, this particular example was around defining what particular services we were going to offer.

For Participant 8, her experience of having left-of-centre viewpoints on human services resulted in an exaggeration of her position by colleagues who disagreed with her recommendations.

A number of my participants were surprised and distressed that their workplaces did not seem to reflect the supportive and inclusive environment that they expected and saw as congruent with social work; instead, some work environments were “very politicized and very unfriendly” (P2). Participant 7 succinctly stated that, “I think a lot of agencies are really messed up.” Again, there is the sense that first-year social workers may not have realistic expectations upon graduating; idealistic ways of understanding human behaviour and systems are also assumed to apply to workplaces, colleagues, and larger structures. We ought not to denigrate the very valuable idealism of first-year social workers, but we might question what exposure students are having to conflict perspectives in the BSW. Seeing human systems as inevitably involving conflict between dominant and less-dominant groups might prepare students for workplaces that are far from humanitarian in orientation. Structural social work can also provide strategies for working to transform human service organizations (c.f. Mullaly, 1997). Idealism does not just emerge in the social work degree; experiences prior to the BSW influence first-year social workers and might inform their expectations. Participant 4 identified her idealism as emerging from her pre-BSW experience in an advocacy-based organization:

P4: I felt, now feel that at the time my thinking was quite idealistic. Again coming from non-profit work and very small grass roots organization, we were like a family. People spent time together at work and outside of work and there wasn't like a weird boundary issue. It was just very comfortable and it was a community.

Participant 4 provided context to her disappointment about the politics of her workplace, explaining that she worked in a large office and found aspects of the environment unsupportive:

A: What would you say was your greatest disappointment?

P4: I think the culture of the office. So we have quite a big office caseworkers, team leaders, manager, assistant manager, clerical/administrative team, investigators. It's quite large and I really expected coming into social work you think people are quite warm and welcoming. It's the nature of our work. We help people and all that sort of cheesy stuff but it's not much different from other large work places. So like the cliques, the clusters of people, the politics, the favouritism, all that type of thing, it happens. So I was quite disappointed by that and just, I mean when you have a very challenging job you want the work environment to be nurturing and supportive and that and it's not always that way. I mean people are burned out or they just don't have an interest of having that connection with their colleagues, keep personal and professional very separate which is fine but you see, I mean certain people are very welcoming, they say hi to everyone and other people are just, they just don't want to go there.

Participant 7 felt unprepared for coping with "office politics" in human services agencies, and the contrast between ideals in client work and how colleagues may interact with each other:

P7: . . . a lot of the agencies that I worked for had strange goings-on, like internal clichés and power dynamics that aren't addressed. Office politics is a learning curve.

A: Is there any particular component of the office politics that has been particularly distressing?

P7: How at times a person can be very entrenched in their role [upward inflection] and gather a lot of power and make other people have to leave. [nervous laughter]

So I've witnessed that.

A: And you were surprised by that?

P7: Yes, very much so! Cause it seems very opposite from client work.

First-year social workers may initially believe that the structural and interpersonal dynamics of human services agencies will mirror the person-centred, power-with models of client care that are emphasized in many BSW programs. Despite the inclusion of structural social work in Canadian BSW programs (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 1997), there seems to be a theory/praxis divide, wherein first-year social workers may feel weak in doing structural social work at the *agency* level, although they understand and can apply the principles in client work. However, because first-year social workers work in the context of human services agencies, skill in working directly with clients may not be sufficient for effective practice—working through conflicts and challenging dysfunctional dynamics is needed to ensure safe workplaces that are responsive to the needs of service-users. Working within agencies can involve reconciling what may be perceived as opposing goals, what Participant 2 called “conflicting interests between doing client- centred work and functioning as a professional in an organization,” which was what he felt least prepared for:

P2: Just in the sense that there are so many conflicting interests between doing client-centered work and functioning as a professional in an organization, because the system is so oppressive towards clients, in my opinion, and so are you going to do what you think is right and what you feel is in your heart to help someone or are you just going to do what covers your butt for liability.

Although social workers are first and foremost accountable to their clients, they are also accountable to the organizations in which they work, and the requirements of organizations are

usually invested with significant authority. How can the first-year social worker make ethical decisions when he or she is faced with conflicts between their perceptions of what clients need and what the system will allow and support? Fairly advanced analytical and systems-levels political skills are needed to manage these challenges, and first-year social workers are more vulnerable in this regard than their more senior colleagues who have had opportunities to practice and develop these skills.

Navigating incongruence between client needs and agency policy was identified as an ethical dilemma in the first year of practice. Despite being new to practice, some first-year social workers are able to bring these differences to a satisfactory conclusion. For example, one participant successfully navigated a complex challenge around the ethics of providing contraceptives to youth in school. Using supervision, consultation, negotiation, and her own evolving judgment, she found ways to meet the needs of vulnerable youth in a way that respected the policies of her workplace.

A number of my participants were distressed to be working within systems of care that were often not responsive to client needs. The failure to secure needed supports for clients was experienced both personally and professionally by the participants. As Participant 6 explained, “I felt like my job was making promises that I knew the system couldn’t keep.” She identified this as the most stressful part of her job:

P6: . . . I felt like I was coming in as some sort of like salesman for government support services and giving people false hope even though I was really trying to say, “you know it can be really difficult, kind of get your battle armour on. I’ve heard from some other clients that it’s been pretty upsetting when they go and apply for income support. I think you are absolutely in a position where that is justified and from what you’re telling me

you need to take care of your children right now and you can't be working. So this is positive but sometimes people have very upsetting experiences there." So I felt like I was a buffer [laughs] between government support services and clients so that government wouldn't be criticized, I would be criticized, and that kept government safe, kept the system safe from criticism..

So there was certainly some negative feedback and then not necessarily negative feedback directed at me but just from people saying, "you know it's exhausting trying to ask for help," and so I just felt frustrated cause again I felt like we were making promises we couldn't keep.

For Participant 6, this process significantly challenged her own sense of professional value (see earlier chapter on occupying undervalued space), as well as her faith in government social services and her role within the larger system of care. She became aware that she might be held professionally accountable for a larger system of care that she felt was not keeping its promises. The impact could be felt personally as well as professionally. Participant 7 discussed the personal impact of informing clients and other professionals that a needed services was not available, a task she reported having to do up to 10 times a day:

A: Have you had any experiences of ethical dilemmas?

P7: I don't know if it's an ethical dilemma but not being able to provide a service for someone cause there just isn't the resource. It *really hurts* [emphasis] to send away a mother and a child because we don't have space, we haven't for months, and the answer is, "call everyday for two to four weeks" [soft voice]

That's the hardest part of my job. I think the hardest part of my job is the lack of resources, knowing what a person needs and not being able to help them and trying to

lower their frustration [nervous laughter] so that they can get through the next two to four weeks and that sucks, I don't think that should be happening.

A: What kind of feelings does that draw up in you?

P7: Sometimes anger at the lack of resources in our society at large, cause people have this idea that there are a lot of resources out there and there really isn't.

It hurts on a personal level. It hurts me to look at someone and not be able to help them, and you kind of have to *harden* [emphasis] your *heart* [emphasis] to be able to do that. That *sucks* [emphasis], that's *terrible* [emphasis].

A: So what do you mean by harden your heart? Can you tell me what you mean by that?

P7: I'll try [pause]. I'll give people the options [at other agencies] and I know that the options are the same as what I'm telling them right now so as soon as they go to any of these places chances are slim that they'll hear anything other than, "come back tomorrow," but that's what I do. I give them these options and I encourage them to keep trying and [pause] some days I don't have that energy and I'm a little bit shorter and I don't like that.

It was very painful for Participant 7 to have to repeatedly tell women in need and their supporters that the service they needed would not be available to them for two to four weeks, despite the pressing immediacy of the crisis they were experiencing. Like other challenges in first-year practice, this was experienced *personally*, rather than just professionally, as illustrated by the heart metaphor used by the participant. Colloquially, the heart is often conceptualized as the emotional centre of the body. In order to reduce her own sense of vulnerability and disappointment, Participant 7 talked about *hardening her heart* to cope, and the awareness that she was doing this was an additional source of pain over the distress at not being able to provide

a needed service. In this context, hardening can be compared to an act of closing, or restricting movement in order to lessen pain. Most first-year social workers will value openness to service users, and so repeated experiences that cause them to become less open could challenge their sense of professional identity.

Renegotiated Idealism and Transformation in Action: Individual Journeys

In this chapter, I explored the meaning of a number of disappointments in first-year practice from the perspective of early-career social workers. These challenges, like other difficulties in first-year practice, were experienced at the personal as well as the professional level. All of my participants except one (who exited social work) found ways to cope with the trials of first-year social work, and to reflect both upon their own stories of transformation and their emerging practice philosophies—this forms the basis of the final section of this chapter.

In this section, I return to the idiographic component of hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009) and explore the individual ways that first-year social workers make sense of their experiences through transformation and positions of renegotiated idealism. The journeys described by the participants were highly individual, demonstrating the unique role that interpretation played in each participant's narrative. I have selected two participants' interpretations to explore more deeply in this section, based on which narratives could best extend a perspective on the lived meanings of first-year social workers.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the emphasis is on what participants can say about the topic rather than about themselves; the goal is to explore individual narratives as a portal for deepening our perspective on a particular topic. My decision to exclude the narrative of the participant who exited the social work field in this section is therefore deliberate. This

participant left the first post-BSW job due to conflict that emerged there, was dismissed from a subsequent job, and was unable to secure further employment in the human services. Although many important issues emerged in this interview, it was less instructive for our understanding of how first-year social workers not in high-conflict situations approach early practice.

“I can’t change anyone but myself.”

Participant 1 reported high levels of personal well-being, and even being at an apex of happiness— “I don’t think my life has always been as happy, as fulfilling, as I feel [now].” She attributed her well-being in early practice to good self care and affirming life choices, and to a balanced perspective on practice originating from her understanding of how social location is determined based on structural oppression rather than meritocracy—learning she strongly attributed to her BSW preparation. This understanding allowed her to be grateful for own security in a world she understood as insecure for many, and to simultaneously recognize clients as her moral equals who were unequally impacted by negative structural dynamics. Participant 1 articulated her role as supporting clients rather than trying to make decisions for them. She accepted her own vulnerability in doing ambiguous and difficult work, and articulated a commitment to social equality with her clients:

P1: And it made me realize how much power I held, and so I tried to do my very best to make sure when I’m working with people they realize that I’m just a human being, and I hope that some people that I work with see that I think that I could just as easily be in their position.

Participant 1 also described coming to terms with realities of social work in agencies, and that she could not force change upon others:

A: I'm wondering if you could tell me how you might be different now? Personally and professionally than you were on that first day you walked into your first job.

P1: I think the first day I thought, I can take on the world. I can do whatever, I'm gonna change this world [laughs], take it all on and I think being in the workplace has really shown me that there are some barriers out there and I can just do the best that I can, and give my best, and not everybody is always going to have the same mentality as me or want to do their best. So, I can't change anyone but myself.

This participant's transformed perspective emerged from a shift from an external to an internal focus. This does not imply a weakening of her commitment to social change within larger systems; rather, it reflects a redirection of her energy towards what is within her control and a letting go of the expectation that her colleagues would share her perspectives on ethics and social justice.

Social work *within* the system is not *about* the system.

Participant 4 identified symptoms of burnout after approximately six months in practice, and this led her to reflection about her own well-being in her work and how she would approach the challenges of early practice differently:

A: How would you describe your general emotional health in your first year of being a social worker?

P4: Quite poor . . . the stress *at* [emphasis] work is one thing. So you always have a million things to do, you can never really get caught up, you're always going to be behind, you are also going to be struggling to make deadlines, court order expiries and that kind of thing.

People just *don't* [emphasis] generally like child welfare. [laughs uncomfortably]
There is resistance and negativity associated with the work that *you do* [emphasis].

The exhaustion, sometimes you have to work crazy hours and it's really unpredictable. The really little time to have relationships outside . . . some weeks are really bad weeks and it affects your mood and it affects the way you talk to other people, and are around other people, and people don't always want to be around you.

I think I started to realize that probably about six months into it and it got to the point where I had to go see a doctor . . . there comes a point where you're just exhausted. You get burned out and you just need a break and you need some time to sort of reflect on your health and your *job* [emphasis] and how it's affecting your health and affecting your relationships and I'm just trying to draw lines and say, "enough is enough and I'm a human being and I need to sort of prioritize this way," but I think it's really easy for things to deteriorate really, really quickly without realizing it and by the time you realize it you've got, I've got grey hairs. [laughs]

Feelings of exhaustion and poor personal well-being can develop quickly in a first-year social worker, especially given the demands of child welfare practice (the high workload but also the negativity towards the role). Participant 4 transformed her relationship with her work by focusing in on her own developing model of social work. She determined that social work *within* the system is not *about* the system:

P4: I think part of that has been developing my own model of working with families so I feel like I'm still bringing myself into the work. That it is not just working within the system. It's navigating the system . . . I mean continuing to do justice work in the community and being in [the MSW program part-time] gives me that connection and that

reminder to think outside the box So that's really helping me stay centered and kind of balanced.

Participant 4 was surprised to find ambiguity and flexibility in social work as a place for deeper work to occur, and for these grey areas to become a place where she could thrive professionally:

P4: So something that I wasn't expecting was to have that opportunity to work with families sort of on the level where there are grey areas. Not everything is black and white. That's something that I wasn't expecting but right now it's sort of my survival strategy.

A: So that's for you where a lot of the heart of the work comes? Would you say it's in that grey area?

P4: Absolutely, and in building relationships with the families and giving them, at least granting them their dignity and their voices and all of those things and sort of supporting them and voicing *their* [emphasis] concerns and *their* [emphasis] opinions and *their* [emphasis] points of view.

Ultimately, Participant 4 felt first-year social workers could never be really be fully prepared for early practice. She explained that first-year social workers need to be willing to go "where the work takes you" because you cannot always control the journey:

A: At this point in your journey as a social worker how would you define social work?

P4: [pause] I don't know. I just think you can't ever really prepare yourself for it. I don't think you can ever really be well prepared. You may *think* [emphasis] you're well prepared but you can never really be prepared for it [upward inflection].

I think that's applicable to all areas of social work. I think you really need to be comfortable with going where the work takes you [pause] cause you just can't always lead the way and have it work out.

Participant 4 re-evaluated her priorities and ways of working after experiencing symptoms of burnout early in her career. The shift in her thinking involved a new way of engaging in social work within “the system”—where the system was given less focus and she engaged with families in the grey areas in between policies and the requirements of the job. Ultimately, she argued for “going where the work takes you,” and sharing leadership with families.

Summary

First-year social work is complex and layered experience impacted by both structural dynamics and individual interpretation. Significant challenges may arise during this novice period but first-year social workers respond with creativity and agency to these trials. In the preceding five chapters, I explored the dynamics of: constructions of young age and professional credibility; the intersection of age and gender in a female predominant profession; feminized constructions of social work; systemic marginalization of social work in non-social work predominant services; fears of making a cataclysmic mistake in early practice; encounters with privilege and marginalization; macro and mezzo level disappointments in early practice; and two idiographic journeys of renegotiated idealism and transformation in action.

Chapter Nine: Discussion

First-year social workers encounter particular challenges of practice and meaning that are shaped by social work's unique positioning in the societies in which it is practiced, the institutional structures that shape its boundaries, and the lived experiences of practitioners. I have presented an interpretation of the subjective experiences of first-year, young-adult Alberta social workers graduating from the BSW degree. I have explored the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year social workers; institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the social work role; first-year social workers' fears of committing a cataclysmic error in early practice; the meaning of encountering one's own privilege and marginalization; disappointments in early practice; and individual narratives of transformation and idealism renegotiated. In this chapter, I connect my findings back to the extant literature and affirm my work's unique contribution to knowledge in this area, and analyze the strengths, limitations, delimitations, transferability, and validation of my work.

Little Girls and Bitching Up—The Intersection of Age and Gender in a Female Predominant Profession

The age range of the new social worker participants in the studies reviewed in Chapter Two reflects the diversity of age of entry in social work, particularly in the United Kingdom (Campanini et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006). The age of participants, where reported, confirms that many new social workers are not young adults, and social work may not be their first occupation (c.f. Bradley, 2008: average age 35, range not reported; Carpenter et al., 2013: age range 21–41+; Jack & Donnellan, 2009: age range <24->45; Jaskyte, 2005: age range 24–53; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996: age range 21–59; Warde, 2009a: age range 28–51). The existing

research has established that when compared to older social workers, younger social workers may show more disturbances in their beliefs about self and others, less personal accomplishment, higher depersonalization, higher intrusion, and more somatic symptoms (Adams et al., 2001). When compared to older novices, younger novice social workers may have less professional confidence (Carpenter et al., 2013); be less satisfied with their social work education (Lyons et al., 2006); and receive more supervision (Lyons et al.). Campanini et al. (2012) found that older English social workers constructed their age as an asset to practice, while Manthorpe et al. (2014) found that direct supervisors reported tailoring induction to consider learning needs differentiated by age (however, how this was assessed or performed is not clear).

Despite an extensive body of literature dealing with gender relations within the social work profession, to the best of my knowledge my study is the first (in the English language) to qualitatively explore the role of gender dynamics in the experiences of new female practitioners. Warde (2009a) also investigated gender in understanding the subjective experiences and meanings of new social workers, but with an emphasis on male practitioners; likewise Bagilhole and Cross (2006) explored how men understand entering female predominant occupations such as nursing, child care, and social work. The majority of the remaining studies reviewed in Chapter Two reported high female predominance among participants (in the range of 69% to 100%, with the median in the 80% range; or simply reported an unspecified female-majority sample), although just over one-quarter of the articles did not report on the gender demographics of their samples (i.e, Chenot et al., 2009; Csiernik et al., 2010; Guerin et al. 2010; Manthorpe et al. 2013/2014; Paré & Le Maistre, 2006; Yan et al., 2013). Less than half of the quantitative and mixed-methods studies investigating phenomena related to new social workers included sex as an independent variable. While some found no statistically significant relationships (i.e.,

Carpenter et al., 2013; Hussein et al., 2014), other researchers found significant relationships between female gender and: retention in child protective services (Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007); satisfaction with education (Lyons et al., 2006); likelihood of working part-time (Lyons et al., 2006; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996) and/or of working in a temporary position (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Despite the predominance of female participants in the studies reviewed in Chapter Two, the role of gender in the experiences of new social workers is only minimally explored by the existing qualitative research, with only one article from Chapter Two explicitly addressing this issue (i.e., Bradley, 2008). While not related overtly to the themes reported from her research, Bradley observed that “life course and gender are likely to play a part” (p. 349) in attitudes formed during early practice. Bradley further advocated that, “students of either gender may benefit from being positively encouraged to plan their careers to fit with preferred personal/professional biographies” (p. 361). My research increases the existing knowledge in this area by extending a critical interpretation of how gender dynamics may shape and be shaped by early-career practice in social work.

It is perhaps important to note that I did not intend to focus on the role female gender plays in the subjective experiences of new social workers; my initial interview guide (see Appendix II) did not probe social positionality outside of age other than to collect some general demographic data. Hermeneutic approaches are practices that allow the preconditions of one’s own inquiry to emerge through risk and challenge (Davey, 2014). This is perhaps one of the strengths of my methodological tradition: the openness to new ideas emerging in interview—Gadamer’s genuine conversation (1970/2007). Additionally, attention to Heidegger’s invisible or Sartre’s nothingness (Smith et al., 2009) in discourse led me to reflect on what was missing, or perhaps veiled, in the interviews: the ways in which gender shaped understandings of how

colleagues might perceive a young female social worker's competency. My own prejudices, or my own "biases of our openness to the world" (Gadamer, 1965/2007, p. 82) shaped my choice to include questions about age in the first interview guide, and was informed by research in nursing and education indicating this is important in the experiences of first-year human services professionals (Olson, 2009; Rippon & Martin, 2006); undoubtedly my own experiences as a first-year social worker in which I perceived that my young age was constructed by some colleagues as a deficit also informed my thinking.

Through reflection on the interviews, I came to understand that conversations about young age in early practice were not just about power dynamics between established and novice workers (although this is certainly part of the picture) but also about how gender is constructed in social work (which subsequently affects how being a "young woman social worker" is understood). Opening up meaning around gender in my interviews led me to a more critical stance on social location more generally, and the ways in which positionality (including marital/parenting status, class, ethnicity, racialized/non-racialized identity, and immigrant/Canadian-born status) influences the dynamics between institutional structures and individual meanings for new social workers. This has deepened and enhanced my capacity and understanding as a social work researcher. My research extends the literature on gender and social work by providing insight into the gendered nature of early practice, including how constructions of a practitioner's young age may reveal both subtleties of intersectionality and gendered meanings.

In an Office in the Basement—Occupying Undervalued Space

Three inter-related dynamics influence social work's relative status nationally and internationally: the views of the general public regarding social work as a profession (Barretti, 2004; Bradley, 2008; Holosko & Leslie, 2001; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004); the influence of macro social policies that facilitate or hinder professional social work activities (Healy & Meagher, 2004); and social workers' positioning vis-à-vis other professional groups (Craig & Muskat, 2013; Frost, Robinson, & Anning, 2005). The existing scholarship on new social workers adequately addresses the first two dynamics, but only minimally speaks to the impact on new social workers of status differentials in inter-professional practice.

The status of social work in inter-professional practice has received substantial attention, especially in medical social work where there are long-standing perceptions of friction between medical and social models of care (Paré & Le Maistre, 2006). Guerin et al. (2010) found that concerns about undesirable perceptions of the social work role by other professionals were experienced negatively by some new social workers. Additionally, Jaskyte (2005) highlighted the reality that many new social workers are entering non-social work predominant teams. However, how new social workers may interpret and even internalize these phenomena has not been fully addressed. My research suggests that several inter-related factors may contribute to an internalization of "having nothing to offer," including: institutional structures that communicate secondary status, perceptions that one is viewed as "less professional" or "less qualified," and difficulties in articulating the value of psychosocial intervention in systems driven by post-positivist epistemologies.

“Ruined Forever”—Fear of Career-Shattering Error

The extant literature on new social workers reflects a considerable scholarly preoccupation with assessment of graduates’ self-appraisal of their own “readiness” or “preparedness” to practice social work (c.f. Bates et al., 2009; Hussein et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2006; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002). In the context of the available research, readiness/preparedness has typically been conceptualized as the congruence (or lack thereof) between what new social workers assess they are required to do in their jobs and what they perceive their social work education equipped them to do (often focusing on instrumental skills): i.e., “the match or mismatch between course output and agency expectations in the first year of practice” (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996, p. 2). This relationship has predominantly been investigated through the use of questionnaires. The extent to which this conceptualization of early social work practice connects to larger personal and professional dynamics is limited. While the focus on education/work requirements congruence has led to some analysis of the organizational and socio-political conditions of education and early practice, two other dynamics have received even less attention: the capacity of social workers and social work education to transform rather than reproduce practice in agencies (Paré & Le Maistre, 2006), and the subjective, personal experiences of new graduates coping with internal questions about their abilities in the field.

My research extends the discussion by exploring the fears arising in early practice in a profession where ambiguity and vulnerability are intrinsic to the work. Exploring the internal expectations new social workers have of themselves and whether these expectations are realistic is an extension of our understanding of the subjective experiences of new social workers. The nature of new social workers’ self-expectation and appraisal has not been completely explored.

Csiernik et al. (2010) observed that new child welfare workers assess their own performance against their own expectations, as well as the expectations of their supervisors and agency, and may also have feelings of vulnerability and anxiety about their own professional abilities. Including the personal component of experience in research about preparedness and new social workers will avoid the potential for excluding narratives of the person within conceptions of professional development (Jack & Donnellan, 2009).

I have asserted that ambiguity is intrinsic to human services work, and is part of the context of professional vulnerability in novice social workers. In my research, themes emerged around fear of making a cataclysmic error in practice as well as high self-expectations around “having the answers,” solving clients’ problems, and being committed 24/7 to an ideal of helping. Fook, Ryan, and Hawkins’ (1997) seminal work highlighted the development in mature social work practitioners of situational rather than context-free rules for action (as per Dreyfus’ model of expertise), which suggests the impossibility of new social workers “having the answers” in every new practice situation they encounter. Add to this the complex and changing nature of both human systems and psychosocial intervention, and expectations around novice expertise must be more guarded.

Encounters with Privilege and Marginalization

The extant literature is remarkably silent on the impact of encountering one’s own privilege on novice social workers, and Warde’s (2009a) work on African-American and Hispanic male novice social workers is the only voice on the potential impact of connecting with one’s own marginalization. This may reflect the limited body of Canadian literature on new social workers, since a structural approach (with its focus on dynamics of oppression) is

particularly influential in the Canadian educational context (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 1997).

Extending a structural analysis to the subjective experiences of novice practitioners is an important bridge between social work education, social work practice, and understandings of social welfare. A structural approach to social work necessitates attention to the unequal social relationships that create physical, psychological, and social distress for marginalised groups who are overrepresented among those served by social workers. Given the dialectical nature of social work—i.e., its potential to both reinforce and challenge oppression (Mullaly, 1997), and the importance of the use of self and reflexivity in social work, we cannot ignore the role of privilege and marginalization in the experiences of novice social workers.

In my study, I found evidence of the importance to new social workers of encountering their own privilege, which was often experienced as both unsettling and transformative. Novices responded to these encounters in ways that had the potential to create positive extension or stagnation in their early practice conceptualizations of social justice. Extending responses included increased empathic response, renewed commitment to social justice, and building authentic relationships, while potentially stagnating responses included personalizing structural issues, focusing predominantly on the divisions of oppression with less hope about the possibilities of solidarity (connected to feelings of guilt about privilege), and feeling uncomfortable about receiving professional compensation. Swift (2005) noted that human services are wrought with a dual consciousness around diversity, in which attending to differences is alternately seen as desirable and threatening, resulting in contradictory discourses within social services (in which differences are both highlighted and suppressed)—discourses that may be particularly confusing for new practitioners.

A number of my participants were also able to connect with their own experiences of marginalization and oppression, and developed a perspective that their reflexivity about these dynamics enhanced their social work practice. From the position of my own reflexivity, I did not initially approach this research with an understanding of how dynamics of privilege and oppression would influence the experiences of first-year social workers. As I discussed in an earlier section, it was the opening up of the role of gender and age that caused me to become more attentive to larger issues of social location and privilege/oppression in early practice.

“My Job Was Making Promises I Knew the System Couldn’t Keep”—Macro and Mezzo Level Disappointments in Early Practice

The macro and mezzo level context of practice was a disappointment for some of my participants, echoing the findings of a number of the studies reviewed in Chapter Two. Like my participants, previous studies have suggested that the organizational context of early social work practice is at least equally, if not more, stressful to new social workers than the rigors of service work and interacting with clients (Jack & Donnellan, 2009). As Jack and Donnellan observed, “whilst service users provoked anxiety for the NQSWs [newly qualified social workers], it is interesting to note that these feelings did not translate into the same level of stress that they experienced as a result of the demands of their employing organisation” (p. 313). Multiple organizational and structural dynamics have been identified as presenting challenging to new social workers: unreasonably high workloads, bureaucratic demands, management structures, lack of resources, limited support, negative interactions with colleagues, interfacing with colleagues perceived as resigned or cynical, and limitations in how the social work role can be realized within specific organizational settings (Jack & Donnellan, 2009; Guerin et al., 2010;

Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). For my participants, stresses included interacting with colleagues they perceived as burned-out, unethical, or judgmental of service users; relating to colleagues who were not social workers; work environments experienced as dysfunctional; bureaucracy; and lack of resources. These phenomena are strongly reminiscent of earlier work in this area, with the exception of the idea that it can be challenging for new social workers to relate to non-social work colleagues (c.f. Bates et al., 2010 where participants rated skills in inter-professional practice as strong compared to a number of instrumental skills).

Despite these significant mezzo and macro level challenges in early social work practice, as a researcher I was inspired to hear from the majority of my participants the ways in which they continued to reach towards creating meaning in practice and enacting idealism in new, pragmatic ways. This has implications for new social worker job satisfaction—Hussein et al. (2014) found the capacity to put one's social work values into action was a strong predictor of job enjoyment for new social workers.

What I found in my research was not the rejection of an earlier, academically informed, “idealistic” way of understanding social work in favour of a more “practical” field-based approach, but rather a commitment to *translating* the ideals of social work and social justice into the real and complex practice realities of social work in agencies. However the experience of some first-year social workers that they must interface with colleagues who are burned-out and judgmental of clients suggests that sustaining this commitment to translation may be challenged across the extended course of a professional career.

Strengths, Limitations, and Delimitations

There are four particular strengths in my work I will explore in this section: the open-ended, exploratory focus I employed; my dual attention to both structural dynamics and individual interpretations; my emergent focus on social location; and attention to age in understanding the experiences of new social workers. The limits of my work that I will discuss the nature of my sample (i.e., Albertans, almost exclusively female, urban, geographic location) and the possibility that social workers who had difficulty making meaning of early practice were less likely to volunteer for my study. Delimitations include the fluidity of the early-career experience, wherein “first-year social work” may be an artificial construct, as well as my Anglophone bias.

Strengths.

Given the limited research available on the experiences of new social workers (much of which emerged after the completion of my data collection) and the notable dearth of research in the Canadian context, choosing a wider focus on subjective experience was more appropriate than seeking to investigate one particular phenomena or microcosm of experience in this group. Subsequently, “first-year social work” became my hermeneutic object and the experiences of my participants my phenomenological data. Approaching my research in this way opened up wider meanings than a more restrictive focus would have allowed.

Secondly, my simultaneous attention to structural dynamics and individual meaning-making offers a corrective to the existing literature, which is, in general, constrained in its exploration of institutional and structural dynamics beyond the agency context, as well as in understanding the ways in which new social workers actively make sense of and respond to the

complex world of practice. While existing articles may be strong in either deconstructing the context of practice or in interpreting subjective experience, few offer a holistic analysis encompassing both (however see Campanini et al., 2012 for an exceptional example of both structural analysis and attention to subjectivity/interpretation).

Thirdly, as discussed in the section “Little Girls and Bitching Up—The Intersection of Age and Gender in a Female Predominant Profession,” I view my emergent attention to issues of social location a significant strength of my work and also evidence of my development as a researcher.

Finally, there is evidence from my literature review and findings that age matters in the experiences of new social workers (Adams et al., 2001; Campanini et al., 2012; Carpenter et al., 2013; Lyons et al., 2006; Manthorpe et al., 2014). Including this aspect of this experience in my study is therefore a strength of my work, and also opened up space to explore the role of gender in the experiences of young women social workers.

Limitations.

While *generalizability* is not a goal of hermeneutic phenomenology, it is important to state the limits of the *transferability* of my work. While my sample was diverse in terms of ethno-racial background, it was not in terms of gender—eight of my nine participants were women. To protect the anonymity of the one male participant, I ensured that none of his quotes identified him as male. The experiences of new male social workers may be very different than the experiences of females, and caution should be exercised in transferring the findings to understanding men.

Additionally, while my research question deals with first-year Albertan social workers, all of my participants lived in the Calgary-area and caution is warranted when considering the transferability of the findings outside of the urban area. My findings are likely transferable to other Anglophone Canadian urban areas, with the provision that Alberta's unique economic and political context may inform ideological positions in social service delivery that pose additional challenges for new social workers seeking to obtain resources for clients. Additionally, because Calgary is an economic hub for the oil and gas industry and is subsequently home to a large number of professional class workers such as engineers, technicians, physical scientists, and personnel in the financial sector (Paynter & Yin, 2013), the perception of the "professionalism" of social work may also be different than in other Alberta and Canadian urban centres where employment patterns are less skewed towards the professional class.

It is likely that my results are applicable to new social workers predominantly entering practice via the diploma and master of social work routes, although I suspect there would be differences in perceptions of status and prestige. Also, while some meanings appear to be mediated by age, other part of my interpretation might apply to older social work novices.

Finally, social workers who had difficulty in making sense of early practice might have been less likely to volunteer to participate in this research, meaning that the experiences of social workers who have unresolved distress and confusion about their first year of practice are likely underrepresented in the interviews.

In closing, it is important to consider the purpose of hermeneutic work when considering limitations. The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to deepen and extend our understanding of the meaning of a lived experience, not to discover the universal and timeless truth about a

phenomenon. Therefore, a competent interpretation invites further inquiry, and is better understood as part of a dialogue than as the final word on a subject.

Delimitations.

First of all, as a Canadian researcher in an officially bilingual nation, I would like to note my functionally unilingual Anglophone bias, which influenced the literature I could read and access; similarly, all of my interviews were conducted in English.

Secondly, through the experience of conducting my research, I discovered that the delineation of “first-year social work” likely had more meaning for me as a researcher than it had for my participants, for whom the fluidity of early-career practice was more important. My participants often drew upon experiences outside of their first year of practice to explain and inform what it meant to be a “first-year social worker.” Sources of experience and understanding included pre-BSW human services experience (paid and volunteer), classroom and experiential learning in the BSW, field placements, other educational programs prior to or after the BSW, and early-career experiences in the second and third year of practice. To recognize this fluidity in the early-career concept, in future research I would avoid focusing on “first-year social work” and instead explore “early-career practice” encompassing all experiences up to and including the third year of practice.

Transferability

As noted in the previous section, generalizability is not the goal of interpretive work. Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on post-modern epistemologies situated in the highly situated meanings of the lifeworld, making empirical generalization to wider populations an inappropriate goal. Nonetheless, the focus is the meaning of lived experience rather than

personal biography; an interpretation of experience extends beyond the idiographic subjectivities of individual participants. Therefore, in order to delimit analytic transferability, it is important to consider the potential implications for human sciences research generally, including for disciplines other than social work. In this section, I explore the potential implications for human sciences research based on my findings, theoretical foundation, and methodological approach. In the next chapter (Chapter Ten: Conclusion) I present applications for education, practice, and research specific to the discipline of social work.

From my findings, the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year workers, and institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the work role, might be particularly fertile for exploration by researchers in a discipline-specific way in other female predominant professions such as nursing and teaching. Fears of cataclysmic error, the meaning of encountering privilege and marginalization, and disappointments in early practice are themes that could inform researchers across the continuum of human services disciplines. The intersection of age and gender likely also has relevance to researchers investigating male predominant professions such as engineering and IT, as an extension of the body of research addressing women's experiences in these settings (c.f. Demaiter & Adams, 2009; Jorgenson, 2002), including life course issues such as motherhood (c.f. Ranson, 2005). If understanding what it means to be a young woman social worker informs an understanding of gender relations within social work, understanding what it means to be a young woman (engineer, IT specialist, or...) might also illuminate gender relations within other professions. Further inter-disciplinary research on workplace relationships between colleagues from different age cohorts might also be fruitful.

From a theoretical perspective, dual attention to the structures that shape practice and the individual interpretations of those embedded within those practices extended the meaning of my work; therefore, I would suggest symbolic interactionism as a fruitful theoretical framework for human sciences researchers investigating early-career issues across the practice disciplines. Methodologically, qualitative approaches in this area have the capacity to uncover taken-for-granted assumptions in quantitative work, such as the concept of “preparedness” or “readiness to practice.” Interpretive approaches, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology, are ideal for exploring the meaning of lived experiences among early-career workers. Critical social theory could be taken up explicitly to extend the interpretive potential of this research, especially by including a focus on social location.

From a broad inter-disciplinary perspective, my work is a substantial contribution to scholarship on gender relations and the workplace. Further work beyond my PhD thesis could expand upon and clarify how social work scholarship could contribute to inter-disciplinary knowledge in these areas.

Validation

Although there is general consensus among qualitative researchers that qualitative work must be evaluated by different criteria than those historically applied to quantitative work, there are myriad approaches to achieving this distinction across the diversity of qualitative traditions (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Reliability and validity have historically been criteria for quality in quantitative research. In the 1980’s, Lincoln and Guba first proposed alternative criteria for determining the “trustworthiness” of qualitative research (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This marked a turning point in a long and complex debate about

assessing the quality of qualitative research (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998), which is informed by epistemological and rhetorical divergence across qualitative traditions (Yardley, 2000). Interpretivist approaches, based on post-modern ways of knowing and emphasizing socially constructed and situated truths, require validation approaches that are “appropriate to the epistemological assumptions and goals of the lifeworld ontology” (Angen, 2000, p. 387). Smith et al. (2009) presented a case for using Yardley’s (2000) principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research to evaluate interpretive phenomenological work, which I have applied as a framework for the validation of my work. The four principles are sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance. I have deliberately chosen to employ the idea of *validation* over *validity* to emphasis assessment of qualitative work as an ongoing process (Angen, 2000).

Sensitivity to context.

Sensitivity to context includes, “the socio-cultural milieu in which the study is situated, the existing research on the topic, the material obtained from the participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180), as well as attention to the interviewing process and ethical dimensions (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). The analytic process involves sensitivity to the context of the research, and “interpretations are presented as possible readings and more general claims are offered cautiously” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181). I demonstrated a strong commitment throughout all stages of my research to respecting the sensitivity of the context, including attention to: geographic, national, and international trends in social work and social services; issues of social location (emergent throughout my study); the extant research on early-career social workers and allied professionals; the dynamics of interpretive interviewing including openness to genuine

conversation (Gadamer, 1970/2007); adherence to ethical standards in conducting research; the demands of the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology; and the situatedness of my analytic claims.

Commitment and rigour.

Commitment refers to attentiveness to multiple aspects of the research process that must be carried out with care, such as facilitating a productive and comfortable interviewing context and thorough analysis of data (Smith et al., 2009). Broadly understood, rigour involves “the thoroughness of the study” (Smith et al., 2009, 2009, p. 181). The sample should therefore be appropriate to the study and research question, and interviews should be of sufficient depth and interpretive focus—“moving beyond a simple description of what is there to an interpretation of what it means” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 181). The rich data obtained through my interviews is evidence of my ability to engage research participants in the co-creation of meaning in a safe and respectful environment. My interviews show evidence that I elicited reflexivity from my participants. I also exercised considerable commitment in the data analysis stage of my research: reading and re-reading transcripts, comparing to the digitally recorded interviews, noting speech patterns, coding, making interpretive notes, and developing a coherent interpretation of the data. This part of the research took place over approximately 18 months, satisfying Yardley’s (2000) requirement of “prolonged engagement with the topic” (p. 221). My epistemological position diverges from Smith et al.’s (2009) focus on presenting participants’ quotes “pretty even-handedly” (p. 182) over the narrative of the findings. While I utilized quotes from all participants in my work, some participants’ quotes appear more frequently or extensively than others. This is not the result of giving differential valuation to diverse accounts of experience,

but rather the selection of quotes based on their unique capacity to give voice to a particular experience or lived meaning central to my interpretation. In interpretive work, truth is found in of events of meaning rather than repetition (Moules, 2002).

Transparency and coherence.

Transparency involves the clearness with which the researcher describes all steps of the research process, including sampling, recruitment, data collection, and analysis (Smith et al., 2009)—a task that I managed well in my work. Coherence is expressed in the findings, adherence to the interpretive phenomenological tradition, and theoretical underpinnings of the research (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) asserted that this may be evident in the reader becoming aware that, “they are positioned as attempting to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the participant’s experience” (p. 183). Additionally, the work must have “rhetorical power or persuasiveness” (Yardley, 2000, p. 222). In my work, I present a coherent and persuasive interpretation of the subjective workplace experiences of first-year Alberta social workers, organized around five major themes, and including my own reflexivity as my understanding of the topic shifted and developed over the course of the research project.

Impact and importance.

The final measure in the validation of a hermeneutic phenomenological work lies in its importance—does the work communicate something impactful (Smith et al., 2009), and does it have socio-cultural consequences (Yardley, 2000)? My work is strongly situated in the applicability of the findings to social work education, practice, and research. Therefore, I believe my work has potential social-cultural consequences, which I hope to realize through dissemination.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

Through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, I sought to answer the question: how do young adult, early-career Alberta social workers understand subjective feelings towards their work experiences in their first year of practice following completion of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree? Informed by my interviews, I developed five major themes in my interpretation: the intersection of age and gender in the structure and meaning of the experiences of first-year social workers; institutional hierarchy and internalized marginalization of the social work role; first-year social workers' fears of committing a cataclysmic error in practice; the meaning of encountering one's own privilege and marginalization; and disappointments in early practice and individual narratives of transformation and idealism renegotiated. There is an interconnectedness among my themes that substantially reflects social work's position in the larger society and the social location of new social work practitioners.

Based on my review of the literature and my findings, I have identified three interconnected areas that influence the subjective experiences of new social workers: institutional structures, social positionality, and lived experience. Institutional structures include factors such as nation state, regulatory context, local context, educational context, practice setting, organizational culture and practices, newcomer induction, inter-professional practice, dynamics of privilege and oppression, and the economic and political system (including the marginalization of role of social welfare). Lived experiences include the way meaning is shaped by subjectivity, agency, and reflexivity. Finally, social positionality encompasses sex, marital/parenting status, ethnicity, class, race/racialized identity, ability/(dis)ability, immigrant/Canadian-born status, and other facets of social location. Through the interplay of

these three areas, subjective workplace experiences are made understandable and meaningful to early-career social workers.

In this chapter, I review the application of my work to social work education, practice, and research and explore my own development as a researcher as I investigated this topic.

Applications to Social Work Education, Practice, and Research

Gadamer stressed the importance of application in interpretive projects (Grondin, 1991/1994). The results of my study invite future application in social work education, practice, and research, with a focus on the inter-related dynamics of institutional structures, lived experiences, and social positionality.

Little girls and bitching up—The intersection of age and gender in a female predominant profession.

In social work education, my findings suggest that educators might need to challenge internalized oppression that reflects gender norms in caregiving work—such as being willing to accept poor treatment in professional settings and constructing male gender as a positive difference and female gender as neutral. In social work practice, we need to identify and challenge negative characterizations of young female workers. This is important for new social workers themselves, colleagues, and managers. We might alert ourselves to the use of language that generally devalues young females (i.e., “little girl” used derogatorily). Rather than tolerating poor work conditions as an inevitable part of caregiving work and viewing acceptance of these as expressive of our professional commitment, we might advocate for improvements through more manageable workloads, fair pay, and emotionally safe (i.e., abuse-free) working conditions. Future research could focus on further understanding the gendered nature of early-

career social work practice across the life course and gender identity continuum (e.g., mature female students, men, transgender persons, non-cisgender identified social workers), as well as utilizing an early-career construct rather than focusing exclusively (or predominantly) on the first year.

In an office in the basement—Occupying undervalued space.

The idea that new practitioners may have difficulty identifying the value of their interventions bears further exploration when considering the potential application of my findings, particularly as related to social work education. In social work programs, we advise students to continually evaluate their own developing practice, in collaboration with their clients. However, if we do not engage in wider discussions about the ways in which evaluation can occur, and the limits of understanding evaluation through a single epistemology (post-positivism), we may not be equipping students to critically and creatively engage with analyzing the impact of their work. Furthermore, our work as social work educators must prepare students for the dualistic nature of social work practice (Mullaly, 1997) and encourage hope that social workers can intervene in human systems (including dysfunctional and/or unresponsive social service systems) without the neophyte personalizing the deficits in our social welfare system and losing both hope and a sense of professional efficacy. For educators, there is also a fine balance between acknowledging professional hierarchies in human service workplaces and inoculating fear of other professional groups. A fundamental goal might be for students and new practitioners to embrace assertiveness for appropriate practice conditions as part of ethical social work, and as something that is in the interest of all human services professions to promote.

In the arena of social work practice, social workers and social work leaders need to examine the ways in which institutional structures within and between organizations create and maintain hierarchical relationships between service-providers that are not in the best interest of those receiving services. Once these structures are identified as barriers, action can be taken to dismantle or transform them, and efforts put into creating more egalitarian inter-professional relations.

Future research might focus on the degree to which advocacy for appropriate practice conditions is viewed as central, or antithetical to, the social work ethos. Healy and Meagher (2004) advocated for social workers to reject assumptions about professional advocacy that further marginalize social workers' knowledge claims, arguing for strategies to "enhance the industrial and cultural recognition of human services work" (p. 243), especially given the gendered nature of social work. Also, the role of public policy as a help or hindrance in the experiences of new social workers merits further investigation, reaching beyond the evaluation of specific educational or induction schemes as seen in the United Kingdom.

“Ruined forever”—Fear of career-shattering error.

The goal of social work education should not be to prevent new practitioners from experiencing any type of anxiety or vulnerability upon starting practice, but rather to expose students to forms of knowledge, practice, and values that can facilitate the healthy resolution of these challenges. Davey (2014) articulated disruptive experience as essential to maturation—it is through the breaking and re-making of patterns of understanding that growth occurs. Additionally, in practice-based disciplines, it is rarely exposure to analytic argument that changes our viewpoints, but rather immersion in an experience that contradicts our originally held views

(Davey, 2014). Educators must therefore grapple with how to best prepare students for anxieties and vulnerabilities that may emerge in early practice. Encouraging students to seek the support of peers and mentors may assist, along with encouraging reflexivity and special attention to self-care in early practice.

In social work practice, I advocate that we continually move away from post-positivist epistemologies that overly privilege expert knowledge and “having the answers,” while moving towards an epistemology of co-creating answers. Additionally, we need to pursue creative and meaningful ways of assessing the impact of our work across our professional lives.

As researchers, when we engage in discourse on preparedness and readiness, we might adopt a critical perspective on assessing educational preparation vis-à-vis congruence with agency requirements. Future research could focus on understanding ways in which education could contribute to new ways of being and doing in social work, and how novice social workers might engage with and experience transformations (rather than reproduction) of practice.

Encounters with privilege and marginalization.

In social work education, we need to combine reflexive practices with analysis of social justice and social welfare. That is, we need to encourage students to understand their own social location in the context of practice. This is especially important if unresolved tensions around awareness of unearned privilege interfere with professional advocacy, via an implicit belief that advocacy for appropriate compensation and support of our work is somehow against the social justice ethos. Additionally, connecting with one’s own marginalization may serve as strength in early practice. In practice situations, recognizing our own social locations and advocating for appropriate practice conditions and compensation is congruent with anti-oppressive social work.

Future research should continue to explore experiences of privilege and marginalization in early social work practice, seeking deeper and more extended narratives of meaning.

“My job was making promises I knew the system couldn’t keep”—Macro and mezzo level disappointments in early practice.

Guerin et al. (2010) suggested that social work students need to be prepared to cope with work in managerially-focused workplaces. I have argued earlier in this chapter that as educators, we aim to prepare students to transform, rather than merely reproduce, existing social work practice through a focus on what social work *can be* rather than what it currently is. As educators, we might consider how we help students to be respectful of current practices while contributing to new ways of actualizing social work in agencies (Paré & Le Maistre, 2006). The sustainability of commitment to social justice across the professional life course is also important and is a question for social work students to consider early in their careers. Additionally, we need to expose students to professionals from other disciplines and seek to disrupt a narrative where one particular view of social services is “taken for granted” with the assumption that it will be shared by all human services workers. In practice settings, we need to avoid using divestment strategies (Jaskyte, 2005) to induct new social workers and instead build upon the considerable strengths they bring to early practice. I believe my research demonstrates that we have much to learn from early-career social workers about realizing social justice values in the messy world of practice. Finally, in terms of future research, it would be useful to understand how practicing social workers renegotiate idealism after the early-career period.

The Hermeneutic Circle: My Development with the Topic

The hermeneutic circle, as conceptualized by Heidegger, involves an existential task through which new experiences (only accessible through our fore-conceptions/prejudices) lead to new understandings and interpretations, which in turn alter our fore-conceptions (LeVasseur, 2003; Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2009). The result is a constantly shifting understanding mediated by experience.

In Chapter Three (Methodology), I identified some of my pre-understandings about the topic, but it was impossible to fully uncover my prejudices until I became engaged in new experiences through the research. As discussed in earlier chapters, my prolonged engagement with, and implementation of, this thesis research project led me to an increased awareness of the role of social position in occupational experience, a new prejudice (again, positively conceived) that will mark a new point of openness in the initiation of future research projects. I also underestimated the role of nation state in the experiences of new social workers until I thoroughly reviewed the extant literature. Through this new awareness, I have also developed an intention to pursue inclusion of critical theory as a foundation in my next research project.

My goals regarding my future research agenda include connecting critical theory to hermeneutic phenomenology; further exploration of the early-career period and the intersection of age/gender (possibly exploring the experiences of women in other female predominant professions and women across the life course); and investigation of how Healy and Meagher's (2004) exhortation for the pursuit of the "industrial and cultural recognition of human services work" (p. 243) can be taken up by social workers in a way that practitioners perceive as congruent with their social justice and humanitarian commitments.

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Appendix I: Interview Guide (Revised)

Background Information

Date of birth:

Date of graduation (BSW):

University:

Current job:

Starting wage/salary:

Jobs since graduation:

Relationship and parenting status:

Ethnic background:

Coming to Social Work

I am interested in hearing about your initial decision to pursue social work. Could you tell me about when you made the decision, what influenced you, and what the experience was like?

Probes:

What were your expectations of social work?

Were there any significant people in your life that influenced your decision?

What other career options did you consider?

Becoming a Social Worker

At what point did you feel you had become a social worker? Is there a particular experience that comes to mind?

Probes:

When did important other people in your personal and work life recognize you as a social worker? What was the meaning of this recognition (or lack thereof)?

Preparedness for Practice

In what ways did you feel most prepared for practice?

In what ways did you feel least prepared for practice?

Probes:

If you felt unprepared for an aspect of practice, how did you resolve this? Was there anyone in your personal or work life that you went to for assistance?

Did you feel your social work program should have better prepared you? What should they have covered and how to make you more prepared?

What have been your experiences of ethical dilemmas? Is there a particular event that comes to mind?

Probes:

What was your emotional response to the dilemma?

Was there anyone in your personal or work life that was able to provide assistance?

Lived Experiences

Could you tell me about a particularly satisfying encounter/experience in your first year of being a social worker?

Could you tell me about a particularly stressful or challenging encounter/experience in your first year of being a social worker?

Probes:

What made this experience particularly (satisfying or stressful/challenging)?

What did you learn from the experience?

How do you understand the experience differently now than you did at the time it occurred?

What was your biggest surprise as a first-year social worker? Disappointment?

What was your greatest fear in your first year as a social worker?

Probes:

How is this fear different for you now?

How would you describe your general emotional health in your first year of being a social worker?

Organizational Context

What was your experience of supervision as a first-year social worker?

Induction is defined as the processes used to introduce new members to the organization and includes the provision of in-service training. Did you receive an induction and if so, what did it comprise?

What was your perception of the material conditions of your work, including factors such as compensation and benefits, working conditions, and unionization?

Interpersonal Context

What were your experiences of power and status as a first-year social worker?

Probes:

How did your clients, colleagues, and supervisors respond to you as a first-year social worker?

Were you treated differently than other workers (in a positive or negative way) because you were a first-year social worker? If so, how?

What were your experiences of having authority and responsibility in your role?

What were your relationships with your colleagues and supervisors like in your first year as a social worker?

Did you work with colleagues who were significantly older or younger than you? What was that experience like?

What is your sense of how your social position may have influenced your experiences as a first-year social worker?

Probes:

sexual orientation

sex

Ethnicity

racialized identity

SES

ability/disability

Meaning of Experiences

How are you different now than on your first day as a social worker (personally or professionally)?

At this point in your journey as a social worker, how would you define social work?

Overall, What was most helpful to you in your first year as a social worker? What was least helpful?

What advice would you offer to a new social worker?

What advice would you offer to an organization that employed new social workers?

Appendix II: Interview Guide (Original)

Background Information

Date of birth:

Date of graduation (BSW):

University:

Current job:

Jobs since graduation:

Relationship and parenting status:

Ethnic background:

Coming to Social Work

I am interested in hearing about your initial decision to pursue social work. Could you tell me about when you made the decision, what influenced you, and what the experience was like?

Probes:

What were your expectations of social work?

Were there any significant people in your life that influenced your decision?

What other career options did you consider?

Becoming a Social Worker

At what point did you feel you had become a social worker? Is there a particular experience that comes to mind?

Probes:

When did important other people in your personal and work life recognize you as a social worker? What was the meaning of this recognition (or lack thereof)?

Preparedness for Practice

In what ways did you feel most prepared for practice?

In what ways did you feel least prepared for practice?

Probes:

If you felt unprepared for an aspect of practice, how did you resolve this? Was there anyone in your personal or work life that you went to for assistance?

Did you feel your social work program should have better prepared you? What should they have covered and how to make you more prepared?

What have been your experiences of ethical dilemmas? Is there a particular event that comes to mind?

Probes:

What was your emotional response to the dilemma?

Was there anyone in your personal or work life that was able to provide assistance?

Lived Experiences

Could you tell me about a particularly satisfying encounter/experience in your first year of being a social worker?

Could you tell me about a particularly stressful or challenging encounter/experience in your first year of being a social worker?

Probes:

What made this experience particularly (satisfying or stressful/challenging)?

What did you learn from the experience?

How do you understand the experience differently now than you did at the time it occurred?

What was your biggest surprise as a first-year social worker? Disappointment?

What was your greatest fear in your first year as a social worker?

Probes:

How is this fear different for you now?

How would you describe your general emotional health in your first year of being a social worker?

Organizational Context

What was your experience of supervision as a first-year social worker?

Induction is defined as the processes used to introduce new members to the organization and includes the provision of in-service training. Did you receive an induction and if so, what did it comprise?

Interpersonal Context

What were your experiences of power and status as a first-year social worker?

Probes:

How did your clients, colleagues, and supervisors respond to you as a first-year social worker?

Were you treated differently than other workers (in a positive or negative way) because you were a first-year social worker? If so, how?

What were your experiences of having authority and responsibility in your role?

What were your relationships with your colleagues and supervisors like in your first year as a social worker?

Did you work with colleagues who were significantly older or younger than you? What was that experience like?

Meaning of Experiences

How are you different now than on your first day as a social worker (personally or professionally)?

At this point in your journey as a social worker, how would you define social work?

Overall, What was most helpful to you in your first year as a social worker? What was least helpful?

What advice would you offer to a new social worker?

What advice would you offer to an organization that employed new social workers?

Appendix III: Recruitment Notice (for distribution in ACSW list-serve)

Early-Career Social Workers Needed for PhD Study on First-Year Social Workers

I am conducting research on the workplace experiences of first-year social workers, in order to better understand their subjective experiences and what supports might be needed to help social workers in the transition from school to practice. Participants in this study will help to inform understanding of the needs and experiences of first-year social workers. In appreciation for their participation, all participants will receive a \$25 honorarium. Participation is completely confidential and voluntary, and is being conducted independently from the ACSW; your participation or non-participation will not affect your relationship or status with the ACSW in any way. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are a Calgary-area, BSW-prepared social worker born in 1980 or later, with one to three years of social work experience, and would be willing to commit two hours for an interview about your experiences in your first year as a social worker, please contact me at the email address or telephone number provided below. In order to participate, you must be registered with the ACSW (provisional status is acceptable), have been continually employed since graduation, have no prior social work diploma, and be able to be interviewed in English.

Researcher:

Andrea Newberry, MSW, RSW, PhD Candidate

University of Calgary Faculty of Social Work

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. The completion of this study fulfills a requirement of my PhD program, for which I receive financial support from the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Doctoral Scholarship of the Social Services and Humanities Research Council.



Faculty of Social Work

Consent Form for Interviews

Appendix IV: Consent Form

Name of Researchers, Faculty:

Andrea Newberry, MSW, RSW, PhD Candidate

Faculty of Social Work

Supervisor:

John Graham, PhD, RSW, Professor

Faculty of Social Work

Title of Project: “*First Year Social Workers’ Workplace Experiences*”

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of first-year social workers in Alberta. More specifically, I want to understand first-year social workers' workplace experiences, what is helpful/not helpful to them as new social workers, and how they negotiate the transition to this new role.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

If you agree to participate I will ask you to commit to one in-person interview (at a location of your choice) and possibly a second interview to clarify anything discussed in the first interview. You will be asked to share your ideas and experience. You will be asked to respond to questions regarding your workplace experiences in your first year of social work practice, your emotional reactions to those experiences, and how you understood what you experienced. You will also be asked to give insight into what was helpful/not helpful to you as a first-year social worker in your workplace. The interview will last for approximately one to two hours and will be audio recorded. If you agree to a request for a second interview to clarify anything discussed in the first interview, this interview will be approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation without consequences at any time. Should you choose to withdraw, all data provided up to the point of your withdrawal would be retained. This study is being conducted independently from the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) and in no way affects your relationship or status with the ACSW. I will have no communication with the ACSW regarding your participation.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

I will record the interviews to improve the accuracy of my work. Your responses are confidential and will not be shared outside of my supervisory committee. No one will have access to your name and identifying information other than me. Your name and identifying information will not appear in papers and reports that will be prepared on my research. You will be assigned a participant number.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

The risk that might arise to you in participating in this study is not different from what one may encounter in everyday life. You will be paid an honorarium of \$25 for your participation. This money is yours to keep even if you choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation is entirely voluntary. There are no expected benefits to you if you choose to participate, other than the opportunity to contribute to understanding the experiences of first-year social workers and providing recommendations on workplace support.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

The interview will be taped recorded and transcribed. You will be assigned a participant number. The professional transcriptionist will sign an oath of confidentiality and will not have access to your name or other identifying information, other than what you may choose to provide verbally in the interview. The sound recordings and transcriptions will be kept electronically in a password-protected online storage system. Data from this study will be stored on Dropbox.com, an American-based online application. As such your responses may be subject to US laws including the USA Patriot Act (2001). Risks are minimal, however, and will be similar to those involved with the use of any electronic data transfer or networking application. Any hard copies

will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office. No one other than my supervisory committee, the professional transcriptionist, and myself will have access to the recordings and transcriptions. I will retain the electronic and hard copy recordings and transcriptions for (a) five years, or (b) until I defend my thesis, whichever comes later. At that point I will delete all digital recordings and shred all transcripts and interview notes. The results of my study, which may contain direct quotes from your interview(s), will be published in my thesis, which will become publicly available upon defense. Your name and identifying information (including your date of birth, current job title, and university attended) will not be included, and I will endeavor to protect your anonymity in all reports and publications, but it is impossible to guarantee that no one will identify your contributions should you choose to share the fact of your participation with others. This is due to the small sample size of this study, which could make your contribution recognizable to others who you have informed of your participation. Information about your age, number of jobs since graduation, relationship and parenting status, ethnic background, and field of practice may be included in dissemination where it is necessary for the interpretation of findings. The results of my study (again, which may include your direct quotes), and which will not include your name or identifying information, may be published in academic journals, books, or used for conference presentations and/or teaching purposes.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the

study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Andrea Newberry, Faculty of Social Work

Dr. John Graham, supervisor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact

Russell Burrows, the Senior Ethics Resources Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix V: Copyright Notices

A substantial portion of Chapter Three: Methodology was previously published in the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, an open-access journal that does not require authors to assign copyright to the journal:

Newberry, A. M. (2012). Social work and hermeneutic phenomenology. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. Available online: <http://jah.synergiesprairies.ca>

RE: Permission to reproduce: "Field Experiences of newly qualified Canadian Social Workers"

Dear Ms. Newberry-Koroluk,

This is to acknowledge your request of July 7, 2014 for permission to include the articles mentioned above in your doctoral thesis.

Permission to include it with a clear statement of the complete source data is hereby granted. The statement must give full acknowledgement, as follows:

**Name of publication: Canadian Social Work Journal Fall 2011 Volume 13 Number 1,
"Field Experiences of newly qualified Canadian Social Workers" Andrea M. Newberry (2011).**

I trust this is satisfactory.

Sincerely,

