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Social Worker Identity: A Profession in Context

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Social work is a broad field encompassing micro, mezzo, and macro areas of practice. Consequently, the field lacks a unifying professional identity due to the expansiveness of the profession. Professional identity is conceptualized as an extension of social identity, vis-à-vis the embodiment of three qualities: connectedness, expansiveness, and effectiveness. This study used 12 in-depth, individual interviews with practicing social workers to explore these qualities. Findings from interviews reveal six primary themes and 21 subthemes pertaining to social worker identity. Themes and subthemes are organized according to three broad families (social work in context, professional trajectories, and external influences). Implications for policy, practice, and future research are presented.

KEY WORDS: *advocacy; empathy; empowerment; professional identity; social justice*

Social work is often defined as a helping profession: "Social workers help individuals, families, and groups restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, and work to create societal conditions that support communities in need" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2016). Guided by the NASW *Code of Ethics*, social workers strive to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 2015, para. 1). Historically, social workers have focused and operated their work in the context of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2015).

Illustrating the breadth of the social work profession, it is estimated that social workers are the nation's largest providers of mental health services, surpassing psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses combined in terms of clinically trained and educated professionals (NASW, 2016). With an estimated percentage change of 12 percent in employment from 2014 to 2024, the social work profession is growing faster than average (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). With social workers employed in various micro, mezzo, and macro areas including hospitals, schools, communities, government, private practices, prisons, research institutes, and mental health and substance abuse facilities, the broad composition of the profession provides a multitude of employment opportunities

and specialties. The levels of practice contribute to the broadness of the field, as micro-, mezzo-, and macro-focused work is illustrative of the multiple roles a social worker can pursue. Micro social work tends to focus on work with individuals and families, including case management, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and family therapy. Mezzo social work situates itself around groups, including communities, schools, or organizations, and focuses on change within these units. Macro social work encompasses practice with large systems such as cities, policy, and systemic advocacy. Due to the range of the field, social workers are trained in many skill areas, including working with individuals, families, and communities, as well as understanding and conducting research, analyzing social policy, and effectuating change on the aforementioned levels (Bent-Goodley, 2014). How an individual arrives at one context for practice over another is considered a simpatico process (Burnette, 2016).

Despite the structure of guiding principles and values attached to the social work profession, the field has historically been in a continuous search for a united voice to integrate the multitude of facets in the field (Dulmus & Sowers, 2012). More specifically, complimentary recognition and support of both micro- and macro-level social work is necessary, most importantly in educating future social workers, as these two social work scopes need to be harmonious and acknowledged as being essential to the social work profession (Austin, Coombs, & Barr, 2005; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). Furthermore, a marriage between individual

therapeutic work and social justice advocacy is also necessary, as the two main focal points of the profession should not outweigh one another; rather, they should balance one another to maximize effectiveness (Kam, 2012).

The inclusion of social work as a science is another area that warrants further discussion. Despite some divide between practitioners' and researchers' ideas on the focus of the profession, it is believed that acceptance of social work as a science will continue to define the social work profession (Anastas, 2014; Brekke, 2012). In addition, translating scientific social work findings in relation to evidence-based clinical practice is ideal, as this allows for a joining of these two areas of social work, which requires innovative ways to move information from social work research findings to actual implementation by clinical social workers (Gitterman & Knight, 2013).

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Social work's roots are based in the fields of medicine and science; consequently, social work is in constant search of a professional identity (Gitterman, 2014). Professional identity is an abstract construct (Wiles, 2013); acquiring it is an ongoing, iterative process (Hsieh, 2016). Professional identity is also considered one form of social identity (Karpetis, 2014). In writing about communities of practice, Wenger (2000) identified three qualities of healthy social identity: connectedness, expansiveness, and effectiveness. Connectedness refers to enduring social relationships, expansiveness refers to the scope of a social–professional identity, and effectiveness refers to positive or negative perceptions of the identity (Wenger, 2000).

Professional identity generally pertains to an individual's embodiment of group-based values and norms (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Clark, 2006; Ibarra, 1999). When one embodies the group-based values and norms of a professional community, he or she is assumed to possess unique skills and abilities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Regardless of a social worker's practice area, pervasive traits like commitment to social justice and equitable treatment of all people are common throughout the profession (Bradley, Maschi, O'Brien, Morgen, & Ward, 2012). Yet debate continues to exist around the organizing principles of social work (Forenza & Germak, 2015). Specifically, there is a palpable dichotomy between micro and macro social work orientations (Gitterman, 2014; Reisch, 2016). Are

we a clinically oriented or advocacy-oriented profession? Do we emphasize change at the individual level or change in society? As these questions remain unanswered, it follows that new social workers will struggle to locate a cogent professional identity (Gitterman, 2014).

In a path analysis of survey data, Levy, Shlomo, and Itzhaky (2014) found that satisfaction with supervision, empathy, and personal values were all related to assuming a professional identity among BSW students. Peterson, Farmer, Donnelly, and Forenza (2014) used latent profile analysis to explain the relationship between a school's implicit curriculum and levels of professional empowerment among BSW and MSW students. In a qualitative study, Wiles (2013) outlined three approaches for nurturing professional social work identities among students: (1) cultivating desired professional traits, (2) facilitating collective identity, and (3) fostering an intrapersonal process toward professionalism. Each study is formative and insightful, although less research actually explores the lived experiences of practicing social workers, for the benefit of new social workers (that is, prospective social workers and social work students).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIM

The present study used Wenger's (2000) three qualities of healthy social identity (connectedness, expansiveness, and effectiveness) to explore the professional identities of new social workers. Specifically, we attempted to answer the research question "What are the lived experiences and professional identities of career social workers?" and to facilitate the following research aim: to introduce new social workers (prospective social workers and social work students) to common aspects of the profession.

METHOD
Research Setting and Sample

After securing approval from a university institutional review board (IRB), we used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling methods. Participants were initially recruited through a local NASW chapter with a recruitment flyer, which was distributed on social media (convenience approach). The recruitment flyer solicited MSW-level social workers who were comfortable sharing their perspectives on social worker identity. When saturation was not achieved through the

NASW sampling frame, the first author purposively recruited additional participants from his professional network.

Patton (2001) stated that there are no firm rules for sample size in qualitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers have adopted saturation as their benchmark in sampling. Saturation, which occurs when "the addition of more units does not result in new information" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 183), was achieved between eight and 10 units. The addition of two to four additional participants ($N = 12$) failed to expand on the richness of data and the depth of participant experiences. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Most participants were female ($n = 9$) and white ($n = 7$). The area of practice best represented by the sample was community organizing/macro social work. It should be noted that this area of practice is a composite designation, which is inclusive of non-profit agency management ($n = 2$), housing advocacy ($n = 1$), and international conflict resolution ($n = 1$). All participants had MSW degrees and an average of 8.8 years of professional social work practice.

Interview Procedure and Schedule

Participants were interviewed in person at a single point in time (cross-sectional research) for approximately 30 to 45 minutes at locations chosen by them. These locations were not their current place of employment. The qualitatively trained first author conducted each independent interview. Eight participants elected to have their interviews videotaped, which involved a second layer of written consent. Four participants declined to be videotaped. Instead, their interviews were captured with real-time electronic note taking by the first author. Consequently, their responses were captured less thoroughly than the eight videotaped interviews. Each participant received $20 remuneration for their time.

The 10-question interview guide was organized around the three qualities of healthy, professional identity (connectedness, expansiveness, and effectiveness), vis-à-vis Wenger's (2000) articulation of healthy social identity. The questionnaire was developed after a review of extant literature regarding professional identity, social work practice, and social work education. Participants were asked to describe what social work means to them, and what connected them with other social workers (connectedness). Participants were also asked to describe ways in which they sought help to better their social work practice (expansiveness) and challenges they encountered in the field (effectiveness).

Qualitative Analysis

Video interviews were transcribed by the second author, a doctoral student in social work. Both video transcription ($n = 8$) and interview notes ($n = 4$) were uploaded into NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2012), a qualitative analysis software suite. There, the second author conducted content analysis, which was organized using the aforementioned software. Then the first author conducted an independent content analysis of transcribed interviews and real-time interview notes by hand.

Both first and second authors began analysis by immersing themselves in the data. They generated a list of a priori codes that reflected the study aim (to introduce new social workers to common aspects of the profession). The authors continued to identify and refine themes and subthemes that were ultimately grouped into families. Throughout this process, both authors shared memos via e-mail to ensure rigor. This approach contributed to a trail of detailed notes that enhanced confirmability (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). After careful consideration and debate regarding the resulting families, themes, and subthemes, the authors reached 100 percent agreement. In addition (and per IRB approval), an edited video exploring major findings was shared with all participants as a form of member check. Through

Table 1: Participant Demographics ($N = 12$)		
Variable	**n**	**%**
Gender		
Female	9	75.0
Male	3	25.0
Race or ethnicity		
White	7	58.3
Black/African American	4	33.3
Indian	1	8.3
Areas of social work practice		
Community organizing/macro social work	4	33.3
Education/educational settings/child welfare	3	25.0
Disabilities	2	16.7
Geriatrics	1	8.3
Medical/hospital setting	1	8.3
Prisoner reentry	1	8.3

this step, member checking was used to enhance validity regarding the interpretation of subjective experiences of the participants (Koelsch, 2013; Lincoln, 1995).

FINDINGS

A number of themes related to the professional identity of social workers emerged from the semi-structured interviews. These themes and subthemes have been classified into three broad families: (1) social work in context, (2) professional trajectories, and (3) external influences.

Social Work in Context

The themes defining the profession and shared perspectives refer to the context for professional social work practice. Whereas the subthemes that pertain to defining the profession refer to principles of social work practice, the subthemes that pertain to shared perspectives refer to common experiences and values shared among study participants.

Defining the Profession. Participants were asked to define social work. This broad query yielded a number of responses, although several transcended the data with more salience than others. For example, the breadth of social work practice was discussed in all interviews. Some participants noted that the profession itself is broad, encompassing micro, mezzo, and macro domains, which is how the field is often described. As one participant who worked with substance-abusing women noted, social work's breadth of practice is intertwined with the profession's person-in-environment (PIE) approach:

> Social work is such a broad discipline. What distinguishes it [from allied disciplines] is that it focuses on the different components of a human being; it's more of a holistic approach to supporting people and helping them become the best person they can be as they face different challenges in different life domains.

Other participants reflected on the empowerment tradition of social work. They identified empowerment as an organizing principle for the profession. One participant noted that empowering clients in clinical social work is at the heart of what social workers do. This assertion was emphasized by another participant, who identified as a housing advocate. She reiterated that even on a macro level, empowering the people affected by a social change effort (in her case, housing reform) is a fundamental component of social work.

The idea of the social work professional filling gaps in essential areas also emerged as a defining characteristic of the broad field. Participants noted that social workers fill gaps that allied professionals may look past. "Social work is distinct in that we look at those gaps and fill them with resources," said one participant. "We are as needed to a client's health as a doctor is; we're just fulfilling a different health-related need," said another participant, who practiced in a hospital setting.

Shared Perspectives. Through their responses and anecdotes, participants in this study illustrated similar perspectives, experiences, and values. In fact, in describing their relationships with fellow social workers, participants referred to an inherent bond among social workers that even included a common language peppered with concepts like "social justice," "empathy," and "strengths based." One participant noted that in his hospital setting, other professionals were often unaware of what medical social workers did. This lack of awareness, in turn, was perceived to create a heightened connection among his social work colleagues. "We get each other," he said.

The distinct social justice lens that social workers share was also identified as a core perspective. As one participant noted, "The idea behind social justice [is] that we are doing what we're doing to address inequity, bias, oppression, and other forces that make people's lives imbalanced. [Social justice] is at the heart of what [social workers] do."

Most participants also noted that a professional commitment to social justice was a primary distinction between social workers and allied helping professionals. Because of this justice-oriented lens, one participant noted, "We probably bring a perspective to conversations that is broader than most." All participants ($N = 12$) agreed that embracing the social justice tradition of social work was a hallmark of their professional identity.

In addition to social justice, a commitment to empathic listening was cited as a shared skill among participants. As one participant noted,

> It never surprises people when I tell them I am a social worker. I think it has something to do with listening. People want to feel heard and

have the chance to speak about their own experiences. Social workers are good at facilitating that.

A second participant arrived at the same independent conclusion:

> I've had people say things like, "Oh, that's not surprising," when I've said I'm a social worker. I think part of that is being a good listener and using reflective listening skills and helping [others] to feel understood in a conversation.

Most participants in this study said their professional identity was easily recognizable, because their shared professional experiences and values often transferred to everyday life. As one participant noted,

> We, as social workers, have accrued a high caliber of interpersonal skills in listening, communicating, in helping people bring out what it is that's on their mind. I think that is clear when I'm in my professional capacity, as well as my interpersonal relationships.

This belief that social work skills and values (for example, empathic listening, social justice) are transferable to everyday life was shared by all participants.

Finally, participants discussed ways to mitigate burnout. They advised prospective social workers to "take care of themselves" and to be proactive about maintaining self-care (the term "self-care" was used by almost all participants). "Social work students should take a pause to prioritize what they will need to sustain their own quality mental health," said one participant. A second participant encouraged new social workers to "celebrate the small victories of each day," as opposed to overly anticipating long-term goals. As discussed by a participant working with formerly incarcerated individuals, a realistic assessment of client self-determination could help new social workers to manage their professional expectations. "Respect people's individual choices," she said. "At the end of the day, clients need to want the help." Her advice was echoed by other participants, who cautioned new social workers against co-opting client failures or setbacks as their own.

Professional Trajectories

The themes pursuit of social work and practice areas refer to the professional trajectories of study participants. Whereas the subthemes that pertain to pursuit of social work refer to a participant's professional motivations, the subthemes that pertain to practice areas refer to challenges and triumphs of working with certain social work clients.

Pursuit of Social Work. Participants were asked to discuss why they chose to pursue social work instead of an allied discipline. Some noted a general "desire to help" others as a motivating factor. As one participant said, "I enjoy making people feel validated."

Several other participants ($n = 3$) indicated having pursued social work after years in another profession. Each of those individuals was enticed to change careers because of social work's commitment to advocacy. As a former chaplain stated,

> I got to help people and work with people [as a chaplain], but one of the drawbacks was that I couldn't take [my practice] a step further and help [clients] advocate for different services they would be entitled to. . . . Social work was the way to do that.

In addition to advocacy, some participants were drawn to the profession because of its PIE approach to helping the individual. As one participant working with adults who have developmental disabilities noted,

> I was working at a community mental health center and preparing for med school, and one of the psychiatrists who was trying to mentor me sat me down and discussed his journey into psychiatry, and he completely turned me off [to it], because he didn't see people in the context of their environments. He was all about pharmacology. Social work is much more holistic in my view.

Participant personal experiences also surfaced as a main reason that they decided to pursue social work, citing their own hardships and the hardships of others as reasons why they sought to pursue this profession. One participant, a geriatric social worker, noted that dealing with a confusing health care system on behalf of his mother first exposed him to the field:

I used to do computer work and I used to live in California, and then my mother in New Jersey got sick. So I took care of her while she was diagnosed with cancer. Accompanying her to [hospitals] in New York made me realize how to deal with the doctors and nurses and social workers, and made me realize the value of connecting pieces to get her the best care possible.

Another participant—the housing advocate—discussed her experiences growing up with a poor, single mother. Like other participants, she described how her formative upbringing and exposures instilled in her a desire to effect change on behalf of clients and target populations.

Practice Areas. Some of the practice areas that participants work in and on behalf of are mentioned throughout this article. This sample, like the field of social work itself, is reflective of myriad practice settings. Most participants noted that the reason they worked with one particular population over another (for example, people with mental illness, children in foster care, unemployed individuals, and so on) is because of the perceived need of the population. For example, one school-based social worker noted that he likes working with adolescents because of their vulnerable (and malleable) state:

Being an adolescent is a critical developmental stage. There is a lot of adjustment that happens in that stage, so for me to have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with adolescents is important.

Participants also discussed challenges they faced in working with target populations. They considered ways in which these challenges may have hindered their practice. Some participants focused on the ecological systems impact, noting that clients are often products of their environments. This can create difficulty in helping clients to change their circumstances:

I work with clients, and they are part of contexts or systems. People are products of their environment. People are "manufactured" in their homes in their community, so getting people to think differently about their world often encounters reluctance or resistance depending on where people are in their life.

Ecological systems impact was also referenced by the individual working with formerly incarcerated individuals: "The hardest part of my job is the realization that I am probably the only person that these individuals are talking with."

Participants also noted that structural issues like societal stigma might pose challenges for working with certain populations. As one community organizing social worker indicated,

The challenge I face . . . is stigma of poverty and what it looks like. Who poor people are, what their lives are like, what their character is like, and what their work ethic is like.

The community organizing social worker's quote is illustrative of the fact that, often, social work clients are oppressed. They are perceived to have weak political power and a deviant social rapport. These pervasive constructions of social work populations are often reflected in the policies that target them and the services that they are (or are not) entitled to.

External Influences

The themes macro forces and building professional capacity refer to external influences on the social work profession and social worker identity. Whereas the subthemes that pertain to macro forces are policy oriented, the subthemes that pertain to building professional capacity refer to formal and informal networks of support for the social workers in this study.

Macro Forces. Participants discussed the influence of macro forces, both directly and indirectly, with significant emphasis on the impact of policy. In fact, several participants inferred that social workers have a professional duty to be politically aware. As one noted, "You cannot make social change or be committed to social justice if you don't think about the governing policies in the country or the world that affect the social structures." This sentiment was affirmed by a participant practicing in an international capacity, who advised that "It is our duty as social workers to stay current with policy and have a seat at the policy-making table, for the benefit of our clients who may not have that luxury."

Nearly all participants discussed the impact of public policy on social work clients. Specifically, policies like the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Social

Security Act were mentioned by respective practitioners. Also explored were the more tenuous implications of Medicaid billing, entitlement program eligibility, and partisan political priorities.

Consistently, participants identified areas in which long-standing public policies did not meet individual client needs or areas in which public policy may have been crafted without the input of subject matters experts, like practicing social workers:

> In working with people with disabilities, a lot of the policies are health and safety oriented, which is important. But that's one aspect of life. It's the part that policymakers see. They don't see transportation or housing or relationship-oriented policy for this population.

The preceding quote is illustrative of the ongoing outreach and education that social workers must endure in their professional practices. As another participant expressly stated,

> There are policies in place that hinder and help. I think you have to close the gap between the hindrance and the help by looking at what changes we can make to a policy, looking at where we can modify to make them more beneficial to all stakeholders involved.

In addition to advocacy in the public sphere, some participants also discussed the impact of organizational policy and the ways in which it, too, can affect the delivery of services for clients:

> Policy drives what we're able to do in a practice setting. If you can't make the case for why what you do is important . . . the sources that decide how they are going to allocate funds may not view what you do as being important either.

Indeed, social workers in this study viewed policy as having a tremendous impact on social work practice. In fact, all participants ($N = 12$) agreed that there is a direct connection between social welfare policy and social work practice. The extent to which policy was perceived as harmful or helpful, however, varied from participant to participant and from policy to policy.

Building Professional Capacity. When asked about how they built professional capacity, most participants in this study illustrated an awareness of professional networks. The most frequently cited professional organization was the National Association of Social Workers (NASW):

> The first [organization] that comes to mind would be NASW. In my experience, I've been on committees with NASW, so there's been an effort to bring education to the larger social work community, to look at policies, or the way certain issues are addressed within social work.

Other professional networks that were mentioned included the Council on Social Work Education and the Society for Social Work and Research, as well as a number of consumer-oriented advocacy groups like Narcotics Anonymous and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Two participants were active, participatory NASW members (and serving in local positions). However, all participants were part of informal support networks to help grow their social work capacity. As one participant stated,

> If I'm dealing with a client and I don't know how to handle it, I can consult with other social workers, and I can also call other agencies and find out if they have [a specific] kind of service.

Building informal relationships with other social workers was described as an important aspect of professional practice. Some participants noted that in their selected populations or areas of interest they actively sought the counsel and input of social workers doing comparable work. Some participants spoke of these relationships happening naturally and gradually, whereas others spoke of these relationships occurring through formalized social work obligations. For example, "New York state is now requiring continuing education credits to maintain a social work license. That's been kind of nice, because I've gotten to network with social workers who practice in other areas."

All social workers in this study indicated the importance of having a good network of professional supports to rely on and consult with. In this ongoing effort to grow and improve capacity,

social workers in this sample are subsequently able to provide maximum care for the populations they serve and the areas in which they practice.

DISCUSSION
Summary of Findings
This research introduces new social workers to common aspects of the profession, which include the context of the social work profession, professional trajectories in the field, and external influences that shape the field and participant work. These are pivotal areas for new social workers to explore, as the voices of career social workers lend a deeper understanding of sustained social work practice. To this end, we sought to answer the question, "What are the lived experiences and professional identities of career social workers?" Findings from this study—organized by family, theme, and subtheme—are summarized in Table 2.

Three families (social work in context, professional trajectories, and external influences) bind themes and subthemes together. Social work in context is composed of two primary themes: defining the profession and shared perspectives. Both refer to the environment for professional social work practice. Subthemes pertain to principles of practice and common experiences and values shared among study participants. In reference to Wenger's (2000) three qualities of healthy social identity, this theme aligns with the understanding of both connectedness and expansiveness. The professional trajectories family includes the primary themes of pursuit of social work and practice areas. Whereas subthemes pertaining to pursuit of social work refer to a participant's professional motivations, subthemes pertaining to practice areas refer to challenges and triumphs of working with focal social work clients and populations. This theme focuses on expansiveness as well as effectiveness when considering Wenger's (2000) ideas of healthy social identity. Finally, external influences family is composed of two primary themes: macro forces and building professional capacity. Subthemes related to macro forces are largely focused on policy; subthemes related to building professional capacity are exclusively focused on formal and informal networks of support, which focus on both connectedness and expansiveness in reference to the three qualities of healthy social identity (Wenger, 2000).

Table 2: Findings	
Family	**Themes and Subthemes**
Social work in context	Defining the profession
	Breadth of practice
	Empowerment as an organizing
	principle
	Filling gaps in essential areas
	Shared perspectives
	Inherent bond among social workers
	Social justice
	Empathic listening
	Easily recognizable professional
	identity
	Mitigating burnout
Professional trajectories	Pursuit of social work
	Desire to help others
	Commitment to advocacy
	Person-in-environment approach
	Personal experiences
	Practice areas
	Perceived need of the population
	Ecological systems impact
	Societal stigma
External influences	Macro forces
	Professional duty to be politically
	aware
	Impact of public policy
	Ongoing outreach and education
	Impact of organizational policy
	Building professional capacity
	Awareness of professional networks
	Informal support networks

Limitations
Because this research is context bound, findings should not be generalized beyond the 12 study participants. In addition, the sample was procured through convenience and purposive methods, which also limits the generalizability of findings. As participants indicated, social work is a broad profession. The practice areas that these participants work in only graze the surface of potential practice contexts. An additional limitation pertains to data procurement methods. Eight participants agreed to videotaped interviews, which we greatly appreciated. Four participants declined to be videotaped. In those instances, the first author had to take notes to record interview responses. Although the first author took pains to capture specifics of each response, both authors concede that the nuances of responses were likely casualties of the note-taking process. In spite of these limitations, this research makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the lived experiences and professional identities of career social workers. To this end, this

research offers a cogent description of common social work experiences for new professionals.

Implications

Implications for Policy. Social workers in this study recognized the influence of policy on (a) the scope and limits of their own practice and (b) the overall well-being of clients. Participants illustrated the vast effect of policy on the social work profession. Particularly important for policymakers is the innate impact that policy has on service allocation and provision within the social work profession, and the direct and indirect influence of policy on the ability of social workers to perform their roles.

This study indicates the unique role that social workers can hold as advocates in the realm of policy, specifically due to their interactions with clients who are affected by policy, which further informs new social work professionals on macro opportunity. Understanding the role of the social worker in crafting and critiquing policy is an essential area for continuous development, as integrating social workers and their expertise into the field of policy provides others with an understanding of frequently underserved populations and ways in which their needs are most effectively addressed.

This study also reflects on organizational policy and procedures, which affect social workers' roles and obligations. More specifically, organizational policy often guides and dictates the scope of the social workers' responsibilities, which can conflict with social work educational training. Understanding how to abide by organizational policy and procedures while still upholding the social work core values is an area that warrants future exploration and discussion, especially for aspiring social workers who are searching for an identity within the field.

Implications for Practice. Social work practice implications include attention to the mitigation of burnout. This issue emerged in the study as intricately connected to the profession. Social workers involved in micro clinical work with clients, as well as those working on the macro level, noted burnout as a potentially debilitating factor within the profession, which can influence one's tenure in the field. This finding illustrates the importance of addressing burnout proactively and continuously, for both aspiring social workers during their education and seasoned professionals throughout their social work careers.

This study further illustrated the complexity of the social work profession by highlighting the difficulties associated with working from a PIE approach. Responses centered on the strong influence of the client's environment, which calls for a need to strengthen work around the PIE approach to further explore how social workers and clients can better navigate issues that arise regarding the ecological systems impact. In addition, practitioners can draw from the shared recognition of empowerment as an essential component to the social work profession. Understanding the ways in which social workers use empowerment, in both direct practice and macro-level work, aids in further development of our profession as one that is focused on providing essential tools to evoke change.

Implications for Future Research. Further exploration of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for engaging in the field of social work is vital. Increasing the understanding of why and when individuals are compelled to enter the field can help better gauge the characteristics and motivations of social workers. In turn, this can provide a closer and more intricate look at those who make up the broad profession.

Further examination of the occurrences of social workers seeking the support of professional organizations to guide their practice is imperative. Exploring reasons for social workers initially making these formal connections, whether through self-interest or through the encouragement of colleagues or others, is an essential area to study to better understand the reach of these professional organizations and their role in the social work profession, for both aspiring social workers and seasoned professionals.

Finally, future research assessing the composition of informal support networks may be useful. Understanding the arrangement of these networks may lead to a better understanding of the types of individuals who compose these networks, whether they are recent graduates or experienced professionals, as well as the type of information shared among these networks. Recognizing what these informal support networks mean for the social work profession is ideal, especially considering how these informal support networks can be better discussed, used, and activated for new social workers. This, in turn, can yield a lively, healthy, and sustainable future generation of professionals. **SW**

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