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Stress Management Experiences of MSW Graduates Transitioning from College to Child Welfare

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Danielle Linette Young

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Stress Management Experiences of MSW Graduates Transitioning from College to Child

Welfare

by

Danielle Linette Young

MSW, Fayetteville State University, 2013

BSW, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

Walden University

December 2023

Abstract

Social work programs diligently recruit and train highly qualified workers to protect America's vulnerable youth. While literature describes stressors professionals encounter during their first year of practice, there is limited research on the challenges Master of Social Work graduates face as they transition from college to a child welfare agency. This generic qualitative research study, guided by the transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC) framework, involved exploring environmental stressors 15 social workers in the U.S. encountered during their first year at a child welfare agency. Research questions involved environmental stressors new graduates encountered, available resources, and coping skills they used to manage occupational stress. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain participants for this study, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. Findings indicated that participants encountered unique environmental stressors (child- and workload-related), which led to harmful psychological and physiological implications. Participants in this study used coping skills to alleviate job-related stressors, such as avoidance and distancing. Findings from this study could lead to educating new graduates about environmental stressors and increasing family and community support for recent social work graduates. Future studies should use the TMSC framework to explore work-related stress, health implications, and coping skills with Hispanics, Asians, Caucasians, and novice Bachelor of Social Work graduates.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to child welfare workers and those who work with abused and neglected children throughout the United States of America. Thank you for accepting the incredible call to be light in some of the darkest places in our society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Child maltreatment is a significant public health issue impacting millions of children yearly (Haney, 2020; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [DHHS], 2022). Social workers in child welfare settings play a critical role in terms of protecting and serving vulnerable children. Due to the nature of the work, child welfare workers are regularly exposed to graphic narratives involving crimes against children (Brady, 2017) and hostile work conditions (Lamothe et al., 2018; Schiff et al., 2018), which have the potential to lead to a significant amount of work-related stress. In addition to making life-altering decisions about the health and safety of vulnerable and marginalized children and youth, social workers new to the child welfare profession simultaneously enter an environment where they are learning organizational structure, establishing alliances with peers, and job roles and responsibilities, which may contribute to additional stress (Frögéli et al., 2019). Stress is one of the leading reasons child welfare workers exit the field (Casey Family Programs, 2017); therefore, it is critical to explore unique experiences of new social work graduates and professionals entering the child welfare workforce.

In Chapter 1, I summarize literature related to the scope of this study, provide evidence of the problem, explain why this study is critical, and identify the focus of the study. Furthermore, in this chapter, I discuss research questions and how the theoretical framework in this study aided in answering these questions. I conclude Chapter 1 by defining essential concepts of this study, identifying the study's limitations, and describing potential implications for positive social change.

Background

In 2020, child protective agencies in the U.S. received approximately 3.9 million referrals affecting 7.1 million children (U.S. DHHS, 2022). All 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and U.S. territories, has its definition of child abuse and neglect, which is based on federal law. According to the U.S. DHHS (2022), “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (p. ix). Throughout history, social workers have played a critical role in child welfare systems, assisting families and protecting children from harm through prevention and intervention services (National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2013).

Social work programs diligently recruit and train highly qualified social workers to serve America’s vulnerable and marginalized children and families. In 2020, more than 31,000 MSW students graduated from 287 Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) programs in the U.S., of which 6.3% or 18 programs offered certificates for child welfare, child protection, or child advocacy (CSWE, 2021). The Social Security Act of 1980 established the Title IV-E educational program for public child welfare workers (Leung et al., 2021). Title IV-E offered each state federal monetary resources, support, and reimbursements to provide programs in hopes of recruiting and strengthening the child welfare workforce through assisting individuals with obtaining a Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) or MSW degree and using their education to provide services to vulnerable youth and children in public child welfare agencies (Leung et al., 2021). However, the

Title IV-E reimbursement rate has steadily declined from 70% in 1980 to 30-50% in 2017 (Leung et al., 2021; Yoder Slater et al., 2018).

Social workers who work in child welfare settings are tasked with making life-altering decisions about health and safety of some of the country's most marginalized and vulnerable infants, children, youth, and families while working in stressful work environments (NASW, 2013). As a national average, 30% of child welfare workers leave the occupation yearly (Casey Family Programs, 2017). Stress is one of the leading reasons child welfare workers exit the field (Casey Family Programs, 2017). In addition to highly stressful work environments and high turnover rates, new social work graduates working in child welfare agencies simultaneously enter an unfamiliar territory where they are developing their professional identities, learning the agency's structure and job-related responsibilities, and creating working alliances with coworkers (Frögéli et al., 2019). Novice MSW social workers who are employed in child welfare settings are presented with significant factors that may lead to stress, which can adversely impact their physical, neurological, emotional, and behavioral health. Having a well-trained, committed, and emotionally stable child welfare workforce is vital to support the permanency, safety, and wellbeing of children involved in child welfare services (Cummings et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Kothari et al., 2021); therefore, this study is beneficial as it would aid in understanding experiences of work-related stress on new social work graduates working in child welfare settings and resources, they need to perform job-related tasks.

Problem Statement

Transitioning from student to professional is challenging and stressful for new graduates (Wong et al., 2018). Elevated levels of stress have the potential to impact individuals physically (high blood pressure, headaches, compromised immune system, impairment of the cardiovascular system), emotionally (irritability, lack of energy and motivation, depression), and neurologically (impaired memory, destructive effect on cognition and learning) in addition to producing long-term implications (Casey Family Programs, 2017; Saddiq & Iqbal, 2019; Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

In the literature, various scholars have described new nursing professionals' challenges during their first year (J. H. Kim & Shin, 2020; Wong et al., 2018); however, researchers have expressed concern with the limited research or data on social workers transitioning from the academic setting to the workforce (Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Tham & Lynch, 2021). In the rare event scholars investigate challenges new social work graduates encounter when transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce, studies tend to use a qualitative inquiry to explore the experiences of Bachelor of Science in Social Work graduates. Tham and Lynch (2019) and Tham and Lynch (2021) conducted a longitudinal survey of 12 Swedish social work graduates' journeys over their first eighteen months after graduating from a Bachelor of Science in Social Work program.

Furthermore, occasionally scholars investigate challenges child welfare workers encounter during their first year at the agency, researchers use quantitative methodology to investigate the phenomena. In one study, scholars used the Florida Study of

Professionals for Safety Families (FSPSF) panel study to investigate the reflection of child welfare workers who departed the child welfare agency and individuals who stayed in their positions for over one year (Burns et al., 2023). In a different study, scholars also used a subsample of the FSPSF panel study, which comprised thirty-eight recently hired child welfare workers, to investigate the workers' view of job stressors and satisfaction (Schelbe et al., 2017). The findings of Burns et al. (2023) and Schelbe et al. (2017) were congruent, as both studies recognized high caseloads as an area of stress for the new child welfare worker. Additionally, Wilke et al. (2020) used the FSPSF panel study to examine factors that projected the early departure of newly hired child welfare workers, particularly ones that left the agency within the first six months of employment, which represented 14.8% of the data sample (p. 188). The Wilke et al. (2020) study found that agency factors, including workload size, case complexity, peer support, and adequate compensation, can positively or negatively impact the retention of newly hired child welfare workers.

Undoubtedly, stress is one of the leading reasons child welfare workers exit the field and have the potential to impact the workers' physical, emotional, and neurological functioning; therefore, to aid in closing the gap in the literature, in this study, I used a generic qualitative design to explore experiences and perceptions involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transitioned from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. Additionally, data from the study were used to identify resources the worker used or desired to manage work-related stress.

Purpose of the Study

The first year can be highly stressful for individuals working in child welfare agencies, as novice social workers are tasked with making difficult and life-changing decisions for the health and safety of abused and neglected children while simultaneously learning about organizational structure, job responsibilities, and building alliances with peers (Frögéli et al., 2019). Stress related to transitioning into new professional role can adversely impact physical, neurological, emotional, and behavioral health. In this study, I aimed to explore experiences involving work-related stress on social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency serving children impacted by child maltreatment. Additionally, I identified resources the individual used or desired to manage work-related stress. By using a generic qualitative study, I was able to explore the worker experiences of job-related stress and resources the individual utilized to manage stress.

Research Questions

RQ1: What environmental stressors do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency? RQ2: How do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 appraise environmental stressors and analyze available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment? RQ3: What coping skills do social workers who graduated with a MSW

degree between June 2022 and May 2023 use to overcome environmental stressors, and what additional coping skills do workers desire to aid in managing stress?

Theoretical Framework

I used the transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC) to guide this study. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the TMSC. An event alone does not produce stress; instead, stress occurs when an individual has assessed the event as threatening, frightening, or detrimental within the limitations of the environment (Kivak, 2020). The TMSC has three phases: primary, secondary, and reappraisal (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). During the preliminary appraisal phase, the person interprets stressors as positive, dangerous, or irrelevant (Kivak, 2020).

During the secondary appraisal phase, the individual evaluates what, if anything, can be done to change the situation and what is at stake if the situation is not resolved (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). Additionally, during this phase, the individual examines their available resources and determines if resources are sufficient or insufficient to meet demands of the event or situation within environmental constraints, if the individual perceives that the available resources (proper orientation/preparation, adequate supervision, and knowledge of the workplace demands) are sufficient to meet the workplace needs, the problem or event will be viewed as challenging, yet not a stressor; however, if the person feels that the event is more significant than whatever resources that they have, the situation is perceived as a stressor (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn., 2021; Kivak, 2020). If a person views the situation as stressful, they will implement

problem- or emotion-focused coping strategies to alleviate stress (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020).

Problem-focused coping techniques are one's ability to address a problem directly and employ problem-solving skills to lessen or eliminate identified stressors from the environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). Emotional-focused coping methods are strategies to manage stress, such as venting or exercising; they are primarily used when a stressful situation cannot be changed (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). The TMSC appraisal process highlights how feelings shape one's thoughts and behaviors; in contrast, a perceived stressful environment with limited resources or coping skills could lead to negative emotions related to stress, such as fear, sadness, or anger (Kivak, 2020), which may impact one's job performance. The reappraisal process is critical in the TMSC model. It aids the individual with reevaluating their stressors and resources to determine if additional items are needed to reduce stress or if the strategies applied adequately alleviated the stress associated with the transaction or interaction between the person and their environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020).

Nature of the Study

For this qualitative research study, I used a generic qualitative research design to explore experiences involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transition from the academic setting to their first year of employment in a public child welfare agency in the U.S. In addition, I explored resources workers used or desired to manage work-related

stress. A generic qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study to explore the phenomenon from perspectives and experiences of each participant. In addition, a generic qualitative inquiry was used to gain insights regarding how participants constructed meaning from their experiences, such as identifying if they were positive, negative, or stress-producing. By using a qualitative research design for this study, I explored the subjective nature of the research problem, discover diverse and distinctive experiences encountered by participants, while presenting study findings in the everyday jargon or language of those who experienced the phenomenon. Qualitative descriptive research design is a method scholars use to explore phenomena or events where little information is known.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in this study. Interviews are commonly used in qualitative research studies to obtain a holistic and integrated view of perspectives, feelings, and experiences involving a specific phenomenon (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). One-on-one interviews were appropriate for this study as they yielded information from participants regarding the studied phenomena.

I used thematic analysis to analyze data. Thematic analysis is commonly used in generic qualitative research inquiries. Braun and Clarke (2022) asserted thematic analysis “is a method for developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset,” (p. 4). A strength of thematic analysis is that it is flexible. Thematic analysis benefited this study in terms of highlighting similarities and differences across the data set. Additionally, thematic analysis is beneficial to generate themes that worked together to provide a thick and rich interpretation and description of the phenomenon.

Definitions

Child Protective Services (CPS) Agency: Authorized state agency that is responsible for receiving and responding to allegations of suspected child abuse and neglect where child welfare workers are tasked with investigating allegations to determine validity of claims and provide critical services to protect and serve vulnerable and marginalized children and their families (DHHS, 2022).

Cognitive Appraisal: The process of how a worker understands, categorizes, and makes meaning of an encounter or event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Emotional-Focused Coping: Cognitive process that is directed at lessening emotional distress caused by stressors such as “avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted behavioral strategies such as “engaging in physical exercise to get one's mind off a problem, meditating, having a drink, venting anger, and seeking emotional support” (p. 151) are also forms of emotion-focused coping. Lazarus and Folkman asserted emotion-focused forms of coping are used when an individual has appraised a situation and noticed that nothing could be done to lessen or alleviate threatening or challenging environmental conditions.

High caseloads: High caseload and high workload are used interchangeably, which is associated with the number of open child maltreatment cases assigned to each child protective service worker (Burns et al., 2023).

Hostile work environment: A child welfare worker is threatened with harm by a client (threats to be killed or suffer other bodily injuries). A child welfare worker is physically harmed by a client (being punched, bitten, and kicked; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018). A child welfare worker is emotionally attacked or belittled by team members, direct supervisors, or upper management (Burns et al., 2023).

New or Recent Graduate: Individual who has worked in a field for less than 12 months following graduation (J. H. Kim & Shin, 2020; Wong et al., 2018).

Problem-Focused Coping: Problem-focused coping strategies involve identifying or defining a problem, generating alternative solutions to the problem, weighing alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and make choices regarding who to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152). While problem-solving skills are typically an objective and analytical process that involves focusing specifically on the environment, problem-focused coping can be directed inward in terms of shifting level of aspirations, learning new skills, finding alternative channels for gratification, and learning new skills (Kahn et al., 1964, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In general, problem-focused coping occurs when workers have been apprised of situations and determined there are tangible ways to resolve them.

Social Work Graduate: Individual who obtains a MSW degree through a program accredited by the CSWE.

Stress: Stress occurs when an individual has assessed a situation or event as threatening, frightening, or detrimental within the limitations of their resources (Kivak, 2020).

Assumptions

First-year professionals encounter many unique challenges related to heavy responsibilities, limited people to rely on for assistance, minimal advanced knowledge, and low self-confidence (Wong et al., 2018). Additionally, social workers who work in child welfare settings are exposed to substantial work-related stressors, such as violent clients and work conditions, high workload, time constraints, work-life balance challenges, and limited support from colleagues (Babu et al., 2020; Harrop & Ioakimidis, 2018). In this study, I assumed social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 will experience significant stress as they transitioned from academic settings to their first year at a public child welfare agency. As a result of the stress associated with being a social work graduate and working in a child welfare setting, I assume that participants in this study will report impairment in their physical and psychological health. In this study, I assumed all participants told the truth with their answers to interview questions.

Scope and Delimitations

I explored work-related stress experiences among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transitioned from academic settings to their first year at a public child welfare agency serving children impacted by child maltreatment in the U.S. Additionally, I explored resources they used to manage work-related stress. While focus groups were considered to answer research questions, one-on-one interviews were used to discover distinct perceptions and

experiences of participants that they would likely not have shared in group settings (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020).

In this study, child welfare workers who graduated from programs that were not accredited through the CSWE were excluded as I required participants to have similar training. In addition, all participants graduated from a CSWE program, as this program has met a series of rigorous standards designed by social work practitioners and educators to ensure students are adequately prepared to enter the workforce. The Council for Higher Education recognizes CSWE as the sole accrediting body for social work education in the U.S.

Results of this study may likely be transferrable to BSW graduates or individuals with various degrees who have worked in a child welfare setting for less than one year, as first year graduates and novice workers may probably share similar experiences. However, results are not generalizable as each person's experiences, perception of incidents, how they describe their experiences, and how they view the world differ. Transferability was established by describing participant interviews, how data were collected and analyzed, and identifying connections between the TMSC, codes/themes, and participants' quotes (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020).

Limitations

The research study had some limitations. While I did not target African Americans or Blacks to participate in the study, every research participant identified themselves as Black or African American, resulting in a participation bias. Elston (2021) asserted that participation bias is common in studies, and because of participation bias,

the data may be skewed as participants disproportionately possessed certain traits that may affect the outcomes. As a result of participation bias, the study's results cannot be generalizable as it is not an accurate representation of the population (Elston, 2021).

Additionally, a limitation of this study was the research design. I used a qualitative inquiry to collect data for this study. Although qualitative descriptive research designs are valuable and beneficial when a researcher wants to describe a phenomenon, specifically when the researcher wants to know the who, what, and where of a topic (H. Kim et al., 2017), the results of the study cannot be generalizable as each person's experiences, perception of the incidents, how they describe their experiences, and how a person views the world differs from person to person (Creswell & Báez, 2020). While the study had some limitations, it is still needed as it used TMSC to explore the perception of work-related stress and coping skills used by new MSW social work graduated as they transition from the academic setting to their first year working in a public child welfare setting. Despite this study's limitations, it was valuable as it started to close the literature gap and offered insight into a topic where little knowledge was known.

Significance

Findings of the study may be used to provide novice social workers with knowledge of environmental stimuli that they may encounter when working at public child welfare agencies that could produce stress, as well as aid the new social worker with understanding different cognitive appraisal methods they may use to determine if the situation is threatening or safe. Additionally, findings could be used to provide novice child welfare workers with knowledge of effective and ineffective coping strategies to

manage job-related stress. Furthermore, findings could be used to understand physical, emotional, and behavioral warning signs of stress, encouraging worker to implement problem-solving or emotionally focused coping skills early in their career to manage stress. Additionally, findings may be used to address the reappraisal process; therefore, they can determine if they need additional training, skills, or knowledge to manage environmental stressors associated with being a novice social worker in a public child welfare setting. This could produce positive social change and has the potential to protect child welfare workers against detrimental consequences associated with work-related stress.

Study findings may promote positive social change in several ways. While data in this study cannot be generalizable, the study could offer family members and friends of the new social work graduate an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and understanding of stressors social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. Therefore, they could provide emotional support by offering the new child welfare work an opportunity to discuss their daily challenges openly. Additionally, upon reading this study, family members and friends of the new social work graduate may have the opportunity to expand their knowledge of emotional, behavioral, neurological, and physical implications of job-related stress and be able to identify if their loved ones are showing signs or symptoms of stress which may lead to burnout or disruption in the family unit. They can verbalize observed behavioral changes workers display, which may be something they may not know about themselves.

Ample supervision is critical to aid new social workers with successfully transitioning from academic settings to the professional workforce, as it confirms that social workers are prepared with crucial skills to provide competent, appropriate, and ethical social work services while caring for clients (NASW, 2013). Findings of this study could aid child welfare supervisors in terms of serving needs of new child welfare workers within their first year of employment. Supervisors may use findings to hear personal experiences involving environmental stimuli workers may encounter, which produce stress. While supervisors may be unable to remove environmental stressors for workers, by addressing workers' experiences in this study, supervisors could implement alternative strategies to assist workers with managing job-related stress, such as completing regular check-ins with workers, offering unit training on signs and symptoms of anxiety, having a list of available resources in communities or agencies for emotional or behavioral support, and developing peer consultation groups where new child welfare workers can connect with others individuals new to the profession to address concerns or receive advice.

In addition to contributing to positive social change, findings of this study could be used for policymakers and advocates to hear personal accounts of MSW graduates' experiences involving job-related stress during their first year of employment at a public child welfare agency. In addition to hearing environmental stressors workers encounters, they may have the opportunity to see which problem- or emotional-focused coping skills they put in place to manage stress and determine what resources improve quality of life for child welfare workers, which could be used to address the high turnover rate in this

profession or secondary traumatic stress. This includes increasing child welfare workers' pay, offering additional time off for self-care, and reducing the number of cases workers can have.

Summary

The first year of social work practice, particularly in child welfare settings, is critical as novice social workers may be tasked with applying academic skills to real-world environments while simultaneously making life-altering decisions about the safety of vulnerable children. In this generic qualitative study, I explored experiences involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. In addition, I explored resources workers had or desired to have to alleviate stress.

In Chapter 1, I identified the research problem and addressed the identified gap in literature. I discussed the purpose of the study and information about the research problem, research questions, and theoretical framework. I concluded this chapter by identifying the scope and limitations of the study, as well as how findings of this study could have a positive effect on the social work profession. In Chapter 2, I include an in-depth literature review involving the theoretical framework as well as essential concepts and topics related to new graduates and child welfare workers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Child maltreatment is a significant concern in the U.S. and abroad, impacting millions of children yearly. To address this public health crisis, child welfare workers ensure the safety, health, and wellbeing of vulnerable children and youth affected by child abuse and neglect. Due to high workloads, regular exposure to graphic narratives of crimes against children, and hostile work conditions, child welfare workers experience a significant amount of work-related stress. Furthermore, new social work graduates encounter many unique job-related stressors during their first year (Glassburn, 2020; McFadden, 2020; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). Exposure to high levels of repeated work-related stress has the potential to impact workers' physical, emotional, and neurological functioning, which leads to high rates of absenteeism and turnover in the child welfare workforce (Casey Family Programs, 2017; Saddiq & Iqbal, 2019; Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

In this qualitative study, I used the TMSC framework to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 and worked at a public child welfare agency within 12 months of graduation. A historical foundation for developing and implementing child protective services in the U.S. and roles of child protective services workers was provided. Furthermore, I address job-related challenges new social workers encounter when transitioning from academic settings to the professional workforce. I also describe emotion- and problem-focused coping skills recent social work graduates and child welfare workers use to transition from educational

environments to the professional workforce. While literature has identified emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies for new social work graduates and child welfare workers, studies rarely explore both factors simultaneously; therefore, this study will aid in addressing this gap in literature.

Literature Search Strategy

The following electronic databases were searched to obtain data for this study: EBSCOHost, ERIC, ProQuest Central, Nursing & Allied Health Premium, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, PubMed Central, SAGE Journals, SAGE Knowledge, ScienceDirect, ERIC and Education Source Combined Search, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, Springer, and ProQuest Ebook Central. I used the following search terms: *transactional model of stress and coping AND work stress, transactional model of stress and coping AND work-related stress or job-related stress or occupational stress, new graduates AND transactional model of stress and coping, social worker AND transactional model of stress and coping, child welfare or child protective services AND transactional model of stress and coping, novice Or new nurses AND transactional model of stress and coping, stress AND novice workers, first-year professional AND transactional model of stress and coping, generic qualitative AND new graduate, qualitative descriptive AND new graduates, positive aspect of stress, eustress, distress, history of child protective service, new social work graduates AND supervision, newly social work graduates AND orientation, early career in social work AND new social work graduates.* All sources were peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and chapters which were written in English and published between January 2017 and August 2022.

Seminal work was also included to understand historical development of concepts that were discussed in this study. Sources were collected between May 1, 2022, and January 16, 2023.

I excluded articles that did not specifically focus on new graduates in the helping profession (teachers, nurses, law enforcement, child welfare, and social workers), stress, work-related/job-related stress, stress management, the TMSC, and child welfare/child protective services. Research yielded 38 articles. Furthermore, I could not locate any articles that exclusively discussed experiences involving work-related stress on social workers who graduated with a MSW degree as they transitioned from academic settings to their first year of employment at a public child welfare agency serving children impacted by child maltreatment. There was also no research on resources MSW graduates used to manage work-related stress when working at a public child welfare agency within 12 months of graduation.

Theoretical Foundation

Stress is inevitable and impacts all areas of a person's life (Rana et al., 2019). While the term stress has increased in behavior and health science over the past five decades (Krohne, 2002), Rana et al. (2019) asserted that little is known about the basic concepts of stress. Selye devised the initial definition of stress: "a non-specific response of the body" (Selye, 1956, as cited in Rana et al., 2019, p. 44). Whereas Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined stress as "a mental or physical phenomenon formed through one's cognitive appraisal of the stimulation and is a result of one's interaction with the environment" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Rana et al., 2019, p. 44).

Throughout history, stress has been viewed and studied from multiple perspectives: stress as a transaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress as a response (Cannon, 1932; Selye, 1956), and stress as a stimulus (Rana et al., 2019; Walinga & Stangor, 2014).

Stress as a Transaction

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the TMSC theoretical framework. Rana et al. (2019) proclaimed that the TMSC is highly influential, widely used, and has generated the most research on stress factors. In contrast to the stress as a response model and stress as a stimulus theoretical framework, TMSC is framed in the person-in-environment context, where stress is viewed as a transaction or interaction between the person and their environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined psychological stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that the person appraises as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). In short, the TMSC model asserts that an event does not produce stress; instead, stress occurs when an individual has assessed the event as threatening, frightening, or detrimental within the limitations of the resources (Kivak, 2020).

Cognitive appraisal and coping are central themes in the TMSC theoretical framework, as they mediate the transaction between the person and the environment (Krohne, 2002). TMSC is appraised using three phases: primary, secondary, and reappraisal (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). In the preliminary appraisal phase, the demands of the event are presented, and the person will appraise the environmental stressor to be irrelevant, benign-positive, or produce stress (Kivak, 2020;

Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sutton et al., 2008). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that when an individual's encounter with the environment does not affect their well-being, it is perceived as irrelevant; therefore, nothing is gained or lost in the transaction, and the person is not invested in a possible outcome. The benign-positive appraisal occurs when the person's interactions with the environment are pleasing and protect or promise to safeguard the individual's well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress appraisal arises when the person's interaction with the environment leads to loss/harm, threat, and challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Threats are appraised as a worry or concern for a loss or potential damage that has yet to occur, which will have negative implications in the future (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The challenge is the last form of stress appraisal in the TMSC model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While the challenge and threat stress appraisal have features in common, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that the main difference between the appraisal is that challenge appraisal focuses on the potential for growth or gains which will present pleasure and joy, and the threat appraisal produces negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and anger. In the stress appraisal stage of the primary appraisal phase, the individual appraises their interaction with the environment to produce harm or loss. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized that when a person appraises a situation as threatening or challenging, something must be done to aid the individual in managing the event; thus, in the TMSC model, one enters the secondary appraisal phase.

In the secondary appraisal phase, the individual examines their available resources and determines if they are sufficient or insufficient to meet the event's or

situation's demands within the environmental constraints (Beer, Phillips, Letson, & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). Sutton et al. (2008) described available resources as ecological, such as the presence of other individuals, economic factors, other social factors, or personal, such as self-esteem, drawing on previous learning experiences, or a collection of different coping techniques. In the TSMC model, if the individual perceives that the resources that they possess are more significant than the demand, the problem or event will be viewed as challenging yet not a stressor; however, if the person feels that the need or event is more significant than resources that they have, the situation is perceived as a stressor (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). While the primary and secondary appraisal stages may occur linearly, Sutton et al. (2008) emphasizes that the appraisal processes do not necessarily have to transpire linearly or chronologically; instead, the primary and secondary appraisal phases may influence each other in a parallel fashion. TSMC model asserts that if a person views the situation as stressful, such as it is perceived to cause psychological stress, imminent bodily harm, or challenges the person's confidence, the individual will implement various strategies or coping techniques (problem-focused or emotional-focused) (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020; Krohne, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

TSMC identified problem-focused coping techniques as one's ability to address the problem directly and employ problem-solving skills to lessen or eliminate the identified stressors from the environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). In contrast, emotional-focused coping methods are strategies to manage stress, such as venting or exercising; emotional-focused coping strategies are primarily used

when a stressful situation cannot be changed (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). In TMSC, the appraisal process highlights how feelings shape one's thoughts and behaviors; in contrast, a perceived stressful environment with limited resources or coping skills could lead to negative emotions related to stress, such as fear, sadness, or anger (Kivak, 2020), which may impact one's job performance. The reappraisal process is critical in the TMSC model; it aids the individual with reevaluating their stressors and resources to determine if additional items are needed to manage or reduce stress. Sutton et al. (2008) emphasized that the TMSC model has promoted considerable research in the field, as it greatly enhances the understanding of distinguishable differences in the stress process, as well as an understanding of the role of cognitive factors in combining experiences of the environment with the psychological and social factors that the individual possesses to manage the event or situation.

Stress as a Response

Cannon and Selye were two prominent researchers who viewed stress from a response-based approach, emphasizing the physiological aspects of the stress response (Rana et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2008). Cannon was the first to recognize the automatic nervous system as a response to stressful stimuli (Sutton et al., 2008), in which the fight or flight response was developed. The fight or flight response occurs “when an organism perceives a threat; the body is rapidly aroused and motivated through the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system to regain homeostasis” (Cannon, 1932, as cited in Rana et al., 2019, p. 45).

In 1956, Hans Selye expanded on Cannon's work by proposing the three stages of the General Adaptation Syndrome model to explain stress as a pattern of physiological responses (Rana et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2008). The alarm reaction is the first stage in the General Adaptation Syndrome model. The body activates the flight or fight response presented by Cannon to deal with or manage contributing stressors (Sutton et al., 2008). In the alarm phase of the General Adaptation Syndrome model, there is an increase in adrenaline discharge in which the nervous system, cardiovascular, and musculoskeletal systems activate to put the body on alert until the identified danger or stressor is over (Krohne, 2002; Rana et al., 2019). The second phase of the General Adaptation Syndrome model is the resistance phase, where the body remains activated at a lower level of intensity to restore its homeostasis while adapting to the stressors (Rana et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2008).

As the body attempts to regulate itself, Rana et al., (2019) emphasized that one or more of the person's organs are adversely impacted by intensely working overtime, which results in the body entering the third and final phase of the General Adaptation Syndrome model, the exhaustion stage. In the exhaustion phase, psychological or physical resources are overstretched and depleted, resulting in disease and death as the organism or person as an individual is no longer capable of meeting and sustaining the increase in demands (Krohne, 2002; Rana et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2008). In comparison, Cannon and Selye's work has enhanced the understanding of the biological aspects of the stress response. Sutton et al. (2008) asserted that the stress response model

only offers a limited explanation of the stress process as the model failed to consider environmental factors or the role of psychosocial protective factors associated with stress.

Stress as a Stimulus

Stress as a stimulus was initially introduced in 1960, and stress was seen as “an important event or change of an individual’s life that demands a response, adjustment, or adaptation” (Rana et al., 2019, p. 45). Aloft Meyer was one of the first researchers who viewed daily life events systematically in which life charts were used to track stressful events in a person's life; Meyer discovered that his patient’s illness tended to occur at the same time a significant life event occurred (Rana et al., 2019). Holmes and Rahe (1967) drew on Meyer’s findings, which aided in developing the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, which is a 42-item life event questionnaire that examined the degree of adjustment that a person experienced when managing multiple life events, such as relocation, loss of a job, and marriage (Rana et al., 2019; Walinga & Stangor, 2014). In Holmes and Rahe’s study (1967), stress is the independent variable in which stress is the cause or contributes to the experience rather than the experience itself, leading to stress (Rana et al., 2019; Walinga & Stangor, 2014). Even though the stress stimulus model explains one’s experiences and identifies experiences as positive or negative based on the person’s cognition or other emotional factors, Rana et al. (2019) and Walinga and Stangor (2014) concurred that the stress as a stimulus model failed to account for other significant variables individuals have, such as life experiences, support networks, previous learning experiences, personality, and environmental factors.

TMSC and Work-Related Stress

TMSC has been widely used in the literature to systematically examine work-related stress in individuals in the helping profession, such as social workers (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Zychlinski et al., 2021), child welfare workers in child advocacy center settings (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021), law enforcement officers in a child advocacy center (Beer et al., 2023), and helping professionals (Howard & Navega, 2018). In one study, researchers used TMSC to gain insight into seven social workers' perceptions of work-related stressors and the long-term and short-term coping behaviors social workers use in response to work-related stress (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021). In another study, scholars used TMSC and the social and economic exchange viewpoint to investigate the relationship between social workers' intent to leave the agency and the workers' psychological distress in 380 Israeli social workers (Zychlinski et al., 2021).

While Beer, Phillips, and Quinn (2021) used a qualitative inquiry to collect data and Zychlinski et al. (2021) used a quantitative methodology to collect data, the results of both studies indicated that social workers used emotional-focused coping skills, such as withdrawing or distancing themselves from others to manage job-related stress. Similarly, social workers reported psychological distress associated with work-related stress in both studies. In Beer, Phillips, and Quinn (2021) study, participants identified experiencing physical ailments (increase in weight, feeling tired), cognitive impairments (not feeling valuable), emotional implications (depression, emotional numbness), and social consequences (difficulties developing relationships with colleagues, challenges associated with interacting with one's family and friends) as adverse implications of

stress. Whereas, in the Zychlinski et al. (2021) study, there was a strong correlation between the more psychological distress reported by the social worker, the more the social worker's relationship with the company or employer was based on the economic exchange (salary), which added to the worker's intent to leave the profession.

While Beer, Phillips, and Quinn (2021) and Zychlinski et al. (2021) used TMSC to explore work-related stress in social workers, Beer, Phillips, and Quinn, (2021) and Beer et al. (2023) used TMSC to gain insight into work-related stress on individuals who were directly exposed to interviewing children who had been abused and neglected. In one study, scholars have used TMSC to gain an in-depth understanding of work-related stress, personal and professional effects of job-related stress, and coping skills of child welfare workers who work as part of a multidisciplinary team in a child advocacy center (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021). In contrast, in a different study, scholars used TMSC to explore the cognitive process of how law enforcement officers who work within a child advocacy center appraise work-related stress, personal and professional impacts of job-related stress, and coping skills the officer used to mitigate or alleviate work-related stress (Beer et al., 2023).

Researchers used the TMSC theoretical model and the structural empowerment framework to explore work-related stress and coping skills among emergency medical services workers, nurses, physicians, and social workers (Howard & Navega, 2018). Howard and Navega's (2018) mixed method revealed that 50% of the researchers' participants were dissatisfied with their professional lives within the work environment, significantly contributing to occupational burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary

traumatic stress (p. 37). The findings in Howard and Navega's (2018) study were congruent with the findings in Beer, Phillips, Letson and Wolf's (2021) study on child welfare workers and Beer et al. (2023) study on law enforcement officers who work in a child advocacy center, as the results of the studies indicated that work-related stress or hearing child maltreatment impacted the worker personally and professionally. For instance, the child welfare worker identified avoidance, withdrawal, difficulties with establishing home-life balances, and ruminating on intrusive thoughts as adverse impacts of work-related stress (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021); the law enforcement officer identified personal impacts of stress as having a negative view of the work, difficulties establishing and maintaining professional and personal boundaries, and ruminating thoughts on adverse or unpleasant events (Beer et al., 2023).

As evidenced by the literature, TMSC has been widely used by scholars to explore work-related stress, health outcomes, and coping skills for individuals in the helping profession (Beer et al., 2023; Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Howard & Navega, 2018; Zychlinski et al., 2021). Therefore, TMSC was an appropriate and feasible theoretical framework to use for this research study, as it provided me with an opportunity to explore work-related stress and health outcomes (physical, emotional, and behavioral) for new MSW social workers working in their first year at a public child welfare agency, as well as explored coping skills the new worker used to alleviate work-related stress (problem-emotion focused).

TMSC and First Year of Practice with Helping Professionals

Transitioning from the academic setting to one's first year in the professional workforce can present significant challenges for the new graduate, which have the potential to lead to stress, burnout, and a desire to leave the organization (Fitchett et al., 2018; Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020). Throughout the literature, scholars have used the TMSC to explore the unique stressors first year professionals experience when transitioning to the professional workforce, such as teachers (Fitchett et al., 2018; Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020) and nurses (García-Martín et al., 2021). Researchers used the TMSC with data from the 2007-2008 US Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Survey to explore work-related stress in first year teachers (Fitchett et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020).

In one study, researchers examined the correlation between stress and the classroom with first-year teachers' risk of anxiety and their professional preparation to enter the field (Fitchett et al., 2018). In another study, researchers investigated the relationship between turnover (the likelihood that the new teacher would move to a different school or leave the profession) and their appraisal of their first year working conditions (McCarthy et al., 2020). The findings in both studies indicated that new teachers appraised the working environment to be challenging and stress-producing during their first year of practice (McCarthy et al., 2020), which led to burnout (Fitchett et al., 2018), high attrition (Fitchett et al., 2018) and turnover (McCarthy et al., 2020) in the new professional. Furthermore, the results of the McCarthy et al. (2020) study showed that teachers who appraised their first year of practice to be challenging or

complex were more likely to move to a different school in year two when compared to teachers who did not appraise their first year of teaching to be challenging.

While participants in Fitchett et al. (2018) and McCarthy et al. (2020) study appraised the environment to be challenging, Keller-Schneider and Hericks (2019) used the TMSC to identify precisely which professional requirements were challenging for new teachers, how the new teacher perceived that they had mastered the professional requirements, and how relevant the professional requirements were (p. 62). The results of this study were congruent with the literature, as beginning teachers identified feeling challenged “in a moderate way;” however, the teacher’s appraisal of the professional requirements differed significantly (Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019, p. 70). Most participants in the study identified teaching to meet each student’s needs as the most challenging, as the teacher had to create an individual plan to evaluate and promote students’ learning achievement and connect with parents (Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019, p. 69).

Additionally, in the literature, scholars have used the TMSC in the nursing profession to investigate new nursing graduates’ experiences transitioning into the workforce during their first year of practice, specifically in the emergency department, during the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Martín et al., 2021). Similar to teachers in Fitchett et al. (2018) study, new nurses working in the emergency department during the global pandemic reported high rates of burnout (García-Martín et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent nurse graduates reported scarce resources and information, and lack of shadowing

periods were common challenges in their first year at the professional practice (García-Martín et al., 2021).

As evidenced in the literature, the TMSC has been effective in exploring how new graduates or first-year professionals perceive and appraise environmental stressors (Fitchett et al., 2018; García-Martín et al., 2021; Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020). While scholars tend to use the TMSC model to explore new or first-year nurses' and teachers' perceptions of job-related stress, how the professional appraised the stress, and adverse health implications of job-related stress, it is rare to locate articles or literature where scholars used TMSC to identify or explore social workers perception of job-related stress, how the social worker appraised the stress, and health consequences associated with work-related stress. Therefore, this study has the potential to make an original contribution to the discipline, as it used TMSC to explore the experience of work-related stress on new MSW graduates working during their first year at a public child welfare agency and coping skills the worker uses to cope with work-related stress.

TMSC and Coping and First-Year Child Welfare Professionals

First-year professionals encounter many unique challenges in transitioning from academic to professional settings, such as heavier responsibilities and limited people to rely on for assistance, difficulties with multitasking, minimal advanced knowledge, lack of confidence in oneself, lack of experience in how to manage the problem, and low self-confidence and increase in anxiety symptoms therefore hesitant to ask senior leaders for help (Wong et al., 2018). In addition to challenges associated with being a new

professional entering the workforce, the new social worker working in a child welfare agency will also be thrust into an environment where the worker is exposed to daily work-related stressors, such as violent clients/work conditions, high workload, time constraints, work-life balance challenges, and limited support from colleagues (Babu et al., 2020; Harrop & Ioakimidis, 2018).

Although numerous studies have used the TMSC to investigate work-related stress in emergency medical services workers, nurses, physicians, child welfare workers, and social workers (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Howard & Navega, 2018) and the TMSC model has been used to explore the unique challenges first year nurses and teachers encounter when transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce (Fitchett et al., 2018; García-Martín et al., 2021), there is limited to no published studies on the use of the TMSC framework to explore the experiences of social workers who graduated with a MSW degree within the past 12 months and have worked at a public child welfare agency for 12 months or less after graduation. This study made an original contribution to the field of social work as it utilized the TMSC to aid in evaluating sources of work-related stressors among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree within the past 12 months and have worked at a public child welfare agency for 12 months or less after graduation and processing how the workers cope with the stressful work situation.

Review of the Literature

Occupational Stress

Workplace stress or occupational stress has captured the attention of many scholars as it has become a significant occupational risk factor that has the potential to lead to long- and short-term health consequences for individuals in the helping profession (Beer et al., 2023; Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Howard & Navega, 2018; Kapoor & Chhabra, 2022; Wilke et al., 2020). In the U.S., the “total estimated cost of WRS (work-related stress) was observed to be considerable and ranged substantially from U.S. \$221.13 million to \$187 billion” (Hassard et al., 2018, p. 1). The loss of productivity (between 70 to 90%) was the main contributor to work-related stress, followed by medical and healthcare costs (10 to 30%; Hassard et al., 2018, p. 1).

Kapoor and Chhabra (2022) emphasized that every single employee may encounter various kinds of stress in their place of employment, as the worker is often confronted with opportunities, demands, and threats that occur one after another, leading to a rush in thoughts, which results in job stress. In viewing workplace stress from a TMSC framework, occupational stress is viewed as a transaction or interaction between the person and their environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). The TMSC model asserts that an event alone does not produce stress. Suppose the person appraises their interaction with the workplace environment as pleasing or an overall good experience. The environment may present some daily discomfort; however, the worker will perceive the environmental stressor as positive (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). For instance, in Burns et al. (2023) study on turnover among newly hired child welfare workers, participants shared that despite the daily discomforts associated with performing job-related tasks, individuals in this study identify feeling a sense of reward, joy, and an overall positive frontline experience as participants were able to make a positive difference in the life of an abused or neglect child and their families.

In contrast, stress occurs if the person appraises their interaction with the workplace environment as challenging, threatening, or detrimental and perceives that he/she does not have the available resources to manage job-related tasks (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, participants in one study identified significant challenges associated with not feeling prepared or having adequate resources (skills and knowledge) to manage complex cases (client's mental health, substance use, and the severity of abuse) and the job requirements (court, caseload/workload, and bureaucracy/organizational culture) contributed to a significant amount of stress, which adversely impacted the child welfare workers health (Benton & Iglesias, 2018). As a result of stress, individuals may experience impairments in their physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health (Kapoor & Chhabra, 2022). According to Wilke et al. (2020), the first six months of employment for a newly hired child welfare worker showed the most significant decline in workers' perceptions of their physical and emotional health (p. 168).

Physical Impacts of Stress

Physical stress response incorporates many critical areas of the body, from the organ system to the regulatory process, including energy supply, cardiovascular

functioning, glucose metabolism, blood clotting, respiratory system, immune system, and water balance (Sutton et al., 2008). Sutton et al. (2008) noted that elevated cortisol levels have adverse implications on one's body, such as high cholesterol levels, infertility challenges, buildup in belly fat, and suppression of the immune process. In severe cases, low cortisol levels can lead to Cushing's syndrome, characterized by hypertension, growth delays, insulin resistance, fatigue syndrome, osteoporosis, irritability, and gonadal dysfunction (Sutton et al., 2008). Additionally, stress can harm the cardiovascular system, resulting in heart disease, arrhythmias, and high blood pressure (American Psychological Association [APA], 2021; Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Furthermore, stress can also have several effects on the functioning of the gastrointestinal system, such as affecting one's appetite and resulting in a reduction in food and water intake, challenges having bowel movements, or emptying the stomach (Ranjbaran et al., 2013; & Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

In the APA Stress in America survey (2021), 66% of Americans cite work as a cause of stress. Multiple studies have examined stress-related physical ailments child protective services workers encounter when performing job-related tasks. In one study, scholars explored the impact of job-related stress among child welfare workers and its perceived effect on the person's health and well-being (Griffiths et al., 2018). The study revealed that weight gain was a significant physical health consequence of job-related stress for child welfare workers, with one worker gaining 40 lbs. within the first three months of starting their child welfare job (Griffiths et al., 2018). Additionally, the results of the study indicated that fatigue/exhaustion, high blood pressure, headaches, and other conditions (developing blood clots in one's leg, breaking out in hives and sores, nervous

ticks, loss of large patches of hair, and mouth ulcers) were physical ailments child welfare workers encountered when performing job-related tasks (Griffiths et al., 2018). In another study, researchers explored the experiences of child welfare workers who decided to stay and those who left their positions within 12 months of employment (Burns et al., 2023). The study revealed that some participants identified being physically ill without providing details about the ailments (Burns et al., 2023). In contrast, others noted experiencing physical conditions, such as swollen ankles due to sitting in a car all day while performing job-related tasks (Burns et al., 2023).

Furthermore, scholars have explored new social workers' physical responses to stress when transitioning from academia to the professional workforce. In one study, scholars explored the experiences of twenty-seven new MSW graduates transitioning from a student to a professional role employed in various settings across the U.S. (Glassburn, 2020). The study discovered that recent MSW graduates experience several stress-related physical ailments as they transition from student to professional, such as experiencing panic attacks, physical exhaustion, and high blood pressure (Glassburn, 2020). While Griffiths et al. (2018) and Burns et al. (2023) studies explored stress-related physical health problems specifically in child welfare workers, and Glassburn (2020) identified physical ailments new MSW social workers encounter as they transition from being student to professional, this study differed as I sought to understand the adverse health consequences, such as stress-related physical ailments, new MSW social workers experience as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency serving children impacted by child maltreatment.

Neurological Impacts of Stress

In addition to affecting one's physical health, Yaribeygi et al. (2017) asserted that stress affects the individual's brain functioning and the nervous system. Stress impacts one's memory in multiple ways. First, memories of stressful events tend to be incomplete or partial because the individual often focuses on small facets or details of the situation at the cost of ignoring the big or broader picture (Sutton et al., 2008). Additionally, stress impacts one's ability to recall major events, such as forgetting a family member's wedding anniversary or birthday, when preoccupied with work obligations or functioning (Sutton et al., 2008).

Several scholars cite the impairment in memory and judgment as a neurological impact of job-related stress on child welfare workers and those who work with abused or neglected children. In one study, the researcher investigated child welfare workers' experiences of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and examined how coping skills safeguard workers from developing STS (Rienks, 2020). Results of the study indicated that child welfare workers had high levels of secondary traumatic stress, where 20.2% of the respondents' endorsed gaps in their memory about the client's session as symptoms (Rienks, 2020, p. 4). In another study, scholars interviewed thirty child welfare workers in the community and residential settings to explore and analyze their experiences with client violence, their interpretation of the violence, perceived organizational and psychological consequences of being exposed to violence in their workplace, and coping skills used to manage intense emotions (Lamothe et al., 2018). When exposed to violent clients, results of the study indicated that child welfare workers reported an impairment in

the workers' clinical judgment, which causes their entire caseload to become at risk of receiving a lower quality of care (Lamothe et al., 2018, p. 315). For example, participants in Lamothe et al. (2018) study acknowledged losing their objectivity, being detached from clients, allowing the workers' fear of violence to dictate their work priorities, and taking on new cases with a rigid or predetermined notion (Lamothe et al., 2018, p. 315).

In addition to impairments in judgment and memory, scholars asserted that individuals who work with abused and neglected children endorse changes in their perspectives or a distorted lens in how they view the world. In Letson et al.'s (2020) study, the researchers used a mixed method approach to investigate the professional and personal impacts for individuals working as part of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) in Children's Advocacy Centers, as well as to explore secondary traumatic stress, compassion satisfaction, and burnout for members of the MDT. Results of the study revealed that members of the MDT team reported adverse changes in their perception as a personal and professional implication for working with traumatized children (Letson et al., 2020, p. 8). Participants in Letson et al. (2020) perceptions of working with children impacted by child abuse and neglect varied, with an individual in the study endorsed feeling as if "everyone is a pedophile" and noted that this cognitive distortion had impacted their judgment as a parent and an adult while another participant identified having "a "cynical outlook on people and what people are capable of" (Letson et al., 2020, p. 8). Stress and health-related consequences associated with transitioning from student to professional have been widely researched in other professions, prominent in nursing; however, the transition from student to professional has received significantly

less attention in social work (Glassburn, 2020). This research differed from Rienks (2020), Lamothe et al. (2018), and Letson et al. (2020) study as I sought to explore stressors and the impact of stress on new child welfare workers experience during their first year of practice at a public child welfare agency.

Emotional and Behavior Impacts of Stress

In addition to the neurological and psychological implications, stress also impacts one's emotional and behavioral health (Sutton et al., 2008). The emotional impact of stress can affect individuals in numerous ways. In the APA Stress in America survey 2021, 49% of adult respondents reported an adverse change in their behaviors, 20% of the survey respondents noted that they were quickly angry or snappy, 20% of the survey respondents shared that they experienced an unexpected fluctuation in their mood, and 17% reported screaming or yelling at a loved one due to stress (p. 2) Additionally, Sutton et al. (2008) noted that individuals experience behavior changes due to dealing with stress, such as increased alcohol consumption, sleep disturbance, and engaging in risky sexual behaviors. In the APA Stress in America survey 2021, 59% of respondents reported experiencing behavior changes in the past month because of stress, such as procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities (22%) or avoiding social situations (24%; p. 7).

While there is a substantial gap in the literature on the emotional and behavioral impact of job-related stress among child welfare workers (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021), several scholars have begun to explore this issue. In one study, scholars surveyed 511 frontline public child welfare workers in one rural state to investigate job-related

stress and negative health habits concerning the workers' self-reported stress levels (Griffiths et al., 2018). The study revealed various emotional symptoms associated with job-related stress among child welfare workers, such as panic attacks, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and anxiety. Additionally, the study's results indicated several behavioral symptoms associated with job-related stress among child welfare workers, such as unhealthy eating habits, substance use, sleep disturbance, irritability, self-neglect, and lack of exercise/movement (Griffiths et al., 2018). In another study, scholars investigated the relationship between child welfare workers' mental health and client-perpetrated violence (King, 2021). The results of the survey indicated that experiencing threats in the workplace adversely impacted child welfare workers' emotional health, which led to moderate to severe levels of anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms (King, 2021).

Like child welfare workers, new graduates transitioning from the academic arena to the professional workforce encounter stress, which could adversely impact the recent graduates' emotional and behavioral health (Geirdal et al., 2019). In a study, scholars used a three-year longitudinal design to examine the change and stability in the level of psychological distress in social workers, teachers, and other health professionals as the individual transitioned from the academic setting to the workplace (Geirdal et al., 2019). Seven hundred and seventy-three young professionals participated in the survey, of which 188 or 24.3% were social workers (Geirdal et al., 2019). At the beginning of the transition, young professionals reported significant stress that led to psychological distress; however, three years later, research participants reported a substantial decline in

psychological distress (Geirdal et al., 2019). The study suggested that new graduates experience the most stress at the beginning of their careers, adversely impacting their psychological health; however, the more the young professional learns their job roles and responsibilities, the person's level of distress decreases (Geirdal et al., 2019). In another study, researchers surveyed 1,638 newly recruited social workers (first year of practice) in China to investigate the relationship between role and burnout during the workers' first year of employment (Tang & Li, 2021). The study's results revealed that role or job-related stress adversely impacted the individuals' emotional health leading to burnout symptoms, such as exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decrease in personal accomplishments (Tang & Li, 2021).

Despite the need for a highly trained and committed child welfare workforce, scholars asserted that the stress associated with job-related tasks has adversely impacted the child welfare worker's emotional and behavioral health (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021; Kothari et al., 2021). As there is a substantial gap in the literature on the emotional and behavioral impact of job-related stress among child welfare workers, studies such as Griffiths et al. (2018) and King (2021), have been critical to understanding the emotional and behavioral consequences of stress child welfare workers encounter when performing job-related tasks. Furthermore, Geirdal et al. (2019) and Tang and Li (2021) adds to the professional body of knowledge by investigating the behavioral and emotional implication stress could have on young professionals (teachers, social workers, and other health professionals). Similar to previous studies, this study made an original contribution to the professional body of knowledge and differed from earlier studies as I used a

qualitative research method to explore stressors new MSW social workers experience as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency while identifying if the workers have experienced any emotional or behavioral consequences associated with workplace stress.

Positive Aspects of Stress

While stress can potentially generate adverse outcomes, Rudland et al. (2020) asserted that good pressure or eustress may also yield positive outcomes. Eustress is a positive cognitive reaction to the cognitive appraisal of an event that has the potential to change over a period that the stressor is present (Rudland et al., 2020). Encountering a new challenge is an example of eustress, as the individual seeks or desires the unique opportunity and believes that they have the adequate resources to meet the demands of the new challenge (Choudhary & Ranjan, 2020). Therefore, the new challenge is viewed as filling, pleasurable tension and offers a meaningful, exciting experience (Choudhary & Ranjan, 2020). Faizan and Haque (2019) emphasized that eustress is linked to increased physical activities, enthusiasm, and creativity. Furthermore, Kapoor and Chhabra (2022) asserted that positive stress aid in motivating individuals to work efficiently.

Brief History of CPS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion or thought that children were being protected and cared for in their homes was a myth of the popular imagination, as the harsh realities of children's living and work conditions came to the forefront of public attention (Podolsky, 2023). In the twentieth century, Podolsky (2023) noted that one in twenty children died before the age of five, and potentially half of their deaths could have

been prevented. Additionally, a minimum of two million children worked long hours in the factories and mines in dreadful conditions, and the arrangement for care for delinquent, orphaned, or neglected children did not exist (Podolsky, 2023). To address this public health crisis, on January 25, 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt and individuals at the White House Delegates held the first National Conference on the Care of Dependent Children (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2010). As a result of the meeting, delegates emphasized the critical need for a national child welfare agency to address the fundamental rights of children in the U.S. (CWLA, 2010).

On April 9, 1912, President William Howard Taft signed into law the Children's Bureau, which marked the first time in the world that a federal agency was devoted to solely focusing on and improving the lives of children, whose sole responsibility was to concentrate on investigating the nation's youngest citizens health, legal status, labor, and disseminating advice about raising children (Connolly & Golden, 2018; Podolsky, 2023). In April 1918, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the second year of America's engagement in World War I was the Children's Year, where there was a national push to gather data on the best practices regarding child and maternal health, exploring the effect of poverty on health, ensuring children have a safe place to play, reducing the school drop-out rate, and addressing orphans and delinquent children (Connolly & Golden, 2018, p. 902). The Children's Bureau and the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense oversaw the data collection procedures for the Children's Year, which President Wilson called "Save 100,000 Babies" (Connolly & Golden, 2018, p. 902). In 1919, the White House Conference on Children's Health met and synthesized all of the

data collected from the 1918 Children's Year; the data collected from the study inadvertently set a standard for the fragmented approach to child well-being in the United States that exists today (Connolly & Golden, 2018, p. 902). One of the most remarkable results of the Children's Bureau's advocacy for children was in 1935 when President Roosevelt signed into law the Social Security Act, which provided the bureau with administrative authority and responsibility to oversee maternal and children health services, medical care for disabled children, and most importantly the child welfare services (Podolsky, 2023).

Society's interest in child abuse and neglect heightened following Caffey's (1946) article that described six young children who suffered from a subdural hematoma and fractures on their arms and legs, likely due to child abuse (Myers, 2008). Following Caffey's (1946) article, Kempe et al., (1962) wrote an article entitled *The Battered Child Syndrome*, which became a "blockbuster" hit and received national attention in the media, capturing the interest of the public and professional community (Myers, 2008). To address child maltreatment nationally, Myers (2008) asserted that behind the scenes, Congress had begun to place new and great interest in child protection, which led to an amendment to the 1932 Social Security Act. The Social Security Act amendment sharpened the focus on child protection, which required that by July 1, 1975, every state in America would ensure that child welfare services were available to maltreated children in rural and urban areas (Myers, 2008). In addition to Kempe et al.,'s (1962) article and the 1962 Social Security Act amendment, the Children's Bureau met twice in the same year to determine how the states could implement more effective procedures to address

and respond to allegations of child maltreatment (Myers, 2008). Kempe and Francis were present for the meeting. The forum recommended that the state legislature require all doctors to report the suspicion of child maltreatment to child welfare agencies or the police (Myers, 2008).

By 1967, nearly all 50 states had laws that placed the duties of child protective services in the hands of the government, and the nongovernmental Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) entities slowly vanished (Myers, 2008). During the nineteenth century, children unable to remain safe in their homes were placed into almshouses and orphanages; however, as the century progressed, almshouses and orphanages disappeared and were replaced with foster homes (Myers, 2008). Although great strides had been made across previous eras to protect children who had been abused or neglected, Myers (2008) asserted that in 1973, US Senator Mondale emphasized that there was nowhere in the federal government that was responsible for ensuring the protection, identification, and treatment of maltreated children; thus, Congress accepted the leadership role in 1974 with the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). CAPTA remains in effect today with the primary goal of providing federal funds to each state to aid in improving the state's response to child maltreatment, explicitly investigating child abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Myers, 2008). While each state has its legal and administrative construct for addressing child maltreatment, each must comply with the federal guidelines and requirements to receive federal funding (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

In the years following the passage of the Social Security Act of 1932 and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, the Children's Bureau focused a great deal of attention on racism, child abuse, mental retardation, adoptions, and foster care in the U.S. (Podolsky, 2023). In the 1980s' the Children's Bureau became an agency within the U.S. DHHS and the Administration for Children and Family, which the Children's Bureau persuaded the American public of the fundamental rights, safety, protection, and welfare of our nation's youngest citizens and children are the business and responsibility of the government (Podolsky, 2023). As with any statute, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 and the Social Security Act of 1932 require regular amendments, revisions, and implementation of new programs to meet the needs of vulnerable youth exposed to child maltreatment. Therefore, there have been several amendments, revisions, and implementation of new programs, including the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the Adoption and Safety Families Act of 1997, and the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2016 (Garcia, 2019; Linjean & Weaver, 2023).

Roles of CPS

CPS agencies are public state agencies that are tasked with the role and responsibility of receiving, screening, and investigating allegations of child maltreatment, determining the validity of the allegations, and providing critical services to protect and serve children and their families impacted by child maltreatment (U.S. DHHS, 2022). Child maltreatment is defined as "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or

exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (U.S. DHHS, 2022, p. 122). Child welfare workers respond to child maltreatment in three phases: intake of the report for suspected child abuse or neglect, investigation or assessment phase, and continuation of care for families determined by CPS to need services (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). The multiple roles and responsibilities at larger agencies are divided into subgroups, such as intake/ assessment or in-home services/ treatment (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). In comparison, one child welfare worker may perform the assessment and treatment tasks at smaller agencies.

While states differ in their specific protocol for responding to abuse or neglect, a child welfare case generally begins when a person calls CPS or the 24-hour child maltreatment hotline to report suspected child abuse or neglect (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). Once CPS receives the report, a child welfare worker and a supervisor will determine if the case is appropriate for a child welfare response. If a child welfare response is needed, the worker and supervisor will decide on the proper response time, such as within 24 hours for an urgent case or 72 hours for a non-emergent patient (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). A child welfare assessment is typically completed between 30 to 45 days. After completing a thorough evaluation, the child welfare worker will determine if the allegation of abuse or neglect is validated, if a child is safe and secure in their home setting and if ongoing services are required to maintain the safety, health, and well-being of the (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). If all safety

concerns have been addressed, the child welfare worker will close the case after consulting with a supervisor; however, if the family needs ongoing treatment, the case will move to in-home services or potentially out-of-home placement.

In addition to performing child welfare tasks, child welfare workers are also responsible for locating and licensing qualified family-centered foster homes, which provide a safe place for a child to go when a child must be removed from their homes due to safety concerns (Cumberland County Department of Social Services, 2023). Child welfare workers also assist with securing a permanent residence or adoption home for a child who cannot return to their family's home due to safety concerns (Cumberland County Department of Social Services, 2023). Ensuring the health and safety of the country's most vulnerable and marginalized youth requires workers to work outside of ordinary (9-5) work hours, adversely impacting the child welfare workers' work-life balance (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). In addition, child welfare workers are frequently exposed to secondary trauma and dangerous work conditions (Office of Program Evaluation & Government Accountability, 2019). Due to the nature of their work, CPS workers encounter many unique job-related stressors that can adversely impact their health and well-being, resulting in the valuable worker exiting the field.

Job-Related Stress Among Child Welfare Workers

Burnout, turnover, and secondary traumatic stress in the child welfare workforce have been well studied. However, there is limited understanding of factors contributing to job-related stress amongst new MSW graduates as one navigates the challenges of

working in child protective services while navigating the trials associated with transitioning from a student to a professional. While researchers use various methodologies to investigate the stressors associated with working in the field of child protective services, scholars collectively agree that visit-related stressors (Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018; Oates, 2019; Russ et al., 2020), child and family related stressors (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; de Guzman et al., 2020; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Oates, 2019; Rienks, 2020; Russ et al., 2020; Schelbe et al., 2017), and workload stressors (Burns et al., 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020) are three central aspects that lead to job-related stress in child welfare workers. Hermon and Chahla's (2019) concepts for visit-related stress, child-related stress, and workload concisely and consistently describe concepts.

Child and Family-Related Stressors

In addition to work-related stressors, child welfare workers are exposed to unique child-related stressors. Throughout the literature, scholars have explored child-related daily stressors that child welfare workers encounter (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; de Guzman et al., 2020; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Oates, 2019; Rienks, 2020; Russ et al., 2020; Schelbe et al., 2017). One study used a longitudinal research design to explore specific child-related stressors 160 public child welfare workers encountered (Hermon & Chahla, 2019). The study's findings revealed six everyday situations faced by child welfare workers, which included endorsing the removal of a child from their home, seeing children who had been severely abused, recommending that the court system terminate a parent's parental rights, observing children harsh living conditions, and

experiencing a child's death on one's caseload or a colleague caseload (Hermon & Chahla, 2019, p. 199). A different study used semi-structured interviews to explore occupational stressors and satisfaction of thirty-eight newly hired child welfare workers in Florida (Schelbe et al., 2017). The findings in Schelbe et al.'s (2017) study were consistent with the results in Hermon and Chahla's (2019) study, as participants identified witnessing the firsthand account of the detrimental child maltreatment and having to work on a death case, which created a significant amount of stress for some workers (p. 60). Furthermore, participants in one study identified that encountering child-related stress broke the individual's "heart" (Schelbe et al., 2017, p. 60).

Throughout the literature, the child welfare profession has been recognized as a challenging and complex field, as child welfare workers are regularly exposed to hearing graphic traumatic narratives of child abuse and neglect, which have the potential to lead to vicarious trauma (Russ et al., 2020) In one study, researchers sought to gain a better understanding of resilience in child welfare workers in Australia to aid in reducing workers distress, strengthening the child welfare workers functioning and retention in the workforce to improve the quality of service for children and their families (Russ et al., 2020, p. 4). The study's findings indicated that child welfare workers reported high levels of stress due to being repeatedly exposed to hearing a client's trauma, where workers identified being "tired of hearing the stories, tired of hearing the grief and the loss and the bad things out there" (Russ et al., 2020, p. 5). Consistent with the results of Russ et al. (2020) study, participants in Oates's (2019) study discussed the challenges associated with being routinely exposed to traumatic materials and events in their places of

employment, such as sexual, psychological, and physical abuse of a child. For instance, a participant in Oates's (2019) study stated, "We take it on-we hear- we feel all the disadvantages and the bad stuff that are happening to our children and families" (p. 4). The stress and anguish the child welfare worker experienced after being routinely exposed to child maltreatment placed workers at grave risk for developing vicarious or secondary traumatic stress, where in one study, child welfare workers endorsed thinking about their clients when they did not want to (69%) and had trouble sleeping (58%; Rienks, 2020).

In addition to working with the abused and neglected child, child welfare workers are tasked with working with the entire family unit (parents, siblings, extended family members, and friends) to ensure that the child remains in a safe and nurturing environment. Challenges associated with the parent and family unit have appeared in various studies. In one study, a participant shared that the individual experienced challenges working with the "complexity of cases," as the participant had to work with parents of family members with mental health illnesses, such as substance abuse, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression, which had the potential to impact the child welfare workers stress level (Benton & Iglesias, 2018). Similarly, in a different study, participants identified challenges working with unengaged, uncooperative, dishonest, and hostile parents and observing the adverse impact the parents' engagement or behaviors has had on the child, which creates additional stressors for the child welfare worker (Schelbe et al., 2017).

As evidenced in the literature, child welfare workers encounter child and family-related stressors daily, which have been identified as challenging, stressful, and troublesome for the worker. This research study differed from Benton and Iglesias's (2018), Hermon and Chahla's (2019), and Rienks' (2020) studies, as I used a qualitative inquiry to gain a better understanding of child-related stressors in newly hired child welfare workers. Instead of quantifying stress in newly hired child welfare workers, using a qualitative inquiry in this study, I expanded on the body of knowledge by providing a voice or personal experience the recently hired child welfare worker encountered. While the findings of Oates's (2019) and Russ et al.'s (2020) qualitative studies were critical in providing a personal narrative of challenges workers experience when hearing graphic narratives of child sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, the participants in both studies worked and lived in Australia; therefore, this study was beneficial in expanding knowledge in the discipline as participants in this study lived and worked in the U.S. While Schelbe et al. (2017) used a qualitative inquiry to gain an in-depth understanding of child-related stressors child welfare workers routinely encountered the participants in the study lived and worked in Florida, this study added to the professional body of knowledge as it identified child-related stressors newly hired child welfare workers encountered in the U.S.

Visit-Related Stressors

Child welfare workers are tasked with conducting home visits to ensure the safety and well-being of the individuals they serve. In the literature, scholars have investigated visit-related stressors child welfare workers routinely encounter (Hermon & Chahla,

2019; Lamothe et al., 2018; Oates, 2019; Russ et al., 2020). In a longitudinal research study with 160 public child welfare workers in the U.S., the study's findings indicated that visiting high-crime areas, making rural home visits, being threatened with harm by a client, making home visits in bad weather, and visiting violent clients were five visit related stressors child welfare regularly encounter (Hermon & Chahla, 2019, p. 201).

Consistent with the previous study, the findings from a different study disclosed that due to visiting a hostile client, the worker had to make a "beeline for the car" because a client chased the individual out of the home (Russ et al., 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, a child welfare worker in Oates's (2019) study recalled a time when an adult client stood in front of the door to prevent the participant from exiting the home, which law enforcement officers had to talk to the client through the door to persuade the client to let the worker out of the home. Congruent with the preceding study, in a different study, participants identified being threatened with death, other assaults, and rape when performing job-related tasks or during home visits.

In addition to the psychological violence or threats that child welfare workers encounter during home visits, the literature indicated that child welfare workers experience physical violence when conducting job-related tasks. In one study, child welfare workers identified being physically harmed by clients, such as being punched, bitten, kicked, and thrown objects at them (Lamothe et al., 2018). Consistent with the previous study, participants in a different study recalled an incident where the worker and a colleague had to lock themselves in a room with an aggressive child due to the client

throwing chairs and threatening everyone, which the law enforcement was called to address safety concerns (Oates, 2019).

Child welfare workers encounter significant psychological and physical violence when conducting home visits or completing work-related tasks, which have the potential to lead to adverse health outcomes for the worker. In the previous studies, the research participants had worked in the child welfare profession for several years. For instance, in Oates's (2019) study, participants had worked in the field of child welfare between nine to eleven point five years. Participants in Hermon and Chahla's (2019) study had worked in the child welfare workforce for three to five years. In Russ et al.'s (2020) study, twenty-two of the twenty-four participants had worked in the child welfare workforce for three or more years, while two had worked at the child welfare agency for less than two years. Lamothe et al.'s (2018) study did not identify the length of time the participants had worked in child protective services. This research study contributed to the discipline's body of knowledge, as it identified work-related, child-related, and workload stressors first-year MSW graduate encountered during their first year at a public child welfare agency.

Workload Stressors

Workload stressors (feeling overworked, high caseloads, unsupportive colleagues, and supervisors) have been well documented in the literature as a challenge child welfare workers encounter daily (Burns et al., 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020). As the first 12 months on the job is a critical turnover period for child welfare workers, in one study, researchers used the

Florida Study of Professionals for Safety Families (FSPSF) panel study to explore the reflection of child welfare workers who left the agency and those who remained in their position over one year (Burns et al., 2023). In a different study, researchers also used a subsample of the FSPSF panel study, which consisted of thirty-eight recently hired child welfare workers, to explore the workers' perception of job stressors and satisfaction (Schelbe et al., 2017). The findings of the studies were congruent, as both studies identified high caseloads as an area of stress for the new child welfare worker. The conclusions of Burns et al. (2023) study indicated that newly hired child welfare workers who participated in the survey identified feeling overwhelmed due to the high caseload associated with the early departure of coworkers or a personal level of competence (p. 4).

Likewise, the findings in Schelbe et al. (2017) study showed that high caseloads were often a result of insufficient staff due to high turnover and vacant positions. In both studies, child welfare workers' expressed concerns about receiving multiple cases a day, where some participants report receiving two to three cases a day while simultaneously feeling pressured to close existing cases quickly (Burns et al., 2023; Schelbe et al., 2017). Additionally, Wilke et al. (2020) used the Florida Study of Professionals for Safety Families Longitudinal panel study to investigate factors that predicted the early departure of newly hired child welfare workers, specifically ones that left the agency within the first six months of employment, which represented 14.8% of the data sample (p. 188). The study's findings were consistent with the literature, as a high caseload size, specifically within the first week after training, was a significant predictor of early departure for the recently hired child welfare worker (Wilke et al., 2020).

Edwards and Wildeman (2018) used previously restricted data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) to explore workload and workforce instability among child welfare workers in the U.S. between 2003 to 2015. Results of the study indicated that on a national average, child welfare workers handle 55 cases a year; however, in some states, such as Florida, Iowa, Illinois, and Rhode Island, workers manage more than 100 cases per year per worker (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018). The study's findings support previous studies as participants in Burns et al. (2023) and Schelbe et al. (2017) expressed concerns about receiving multiple cases daily. In the literature, scholars assert that high caseloads have been associated with high levels of turnover in child welfare workers, which adversely impacts their relationship with clients, professional standards, and the time it takes to complete cases (Burns et al., 2023; Casey Family Programs, 2017). For instance, stressors associated with high workloads and high caseloads increase the amount of time it takes for the worker to create a permanency plan for the abused or neglected child leading to rates of recurrent maltreatment, adversely impacting the time a child spends in foster care or the number of placements the child has, and increased the likelihood that the child will re-enter into the foster care system once returning home (Casey Family Programs, 2017, p. 2).

Beyond high caseloads and feeling overworked, throughout the literature, participants who were newly hired child welfare workers also reported feeling unsupported by colleagues and supervisors (Burns et al., 2023; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020). In Schelbe et al. (2017), newly employed child welfare workers participants identified experiencing problematic relationships with staff (coworkers,

administration, and supervisors), where the newly hired child welfare employee reported experiencing stress due to the lack of support and unresponsiveness from staff members, which adversely impacted the work atmosphere. The findings in Burns et al. (2023) study was consistent with the findings of Schelbe et al. (2017), as participants identified the lack of support from supervisors, such as being indifferent towards the child welfare workers' concerns and being bullied by leadership, added to job dissatisfaction which influenced the participants' decision to leave the agency. Furthermore, agency factors, including workload size, case complexity, supportive and peer support, and adequate compensation, can positively or negatively impact the retention of child welfare workers (Wilke et al., 2020, p. 189).

Work-related stress is a significant problem that has the potential to adversely affect one's work with clients, colleagues, and the workers' overall mental and physical health. A strength in Burns et al. (2023) and Schelbe et al. (2017) studies were that researchers used data from the Florida Study of Professionals for Safety Families Longitudinal panel, explicitly focusing on newly hired child welfare workers, to investigate turnover, work-related stress, and intent to leave the agency. A strength of Edwards and Wildeman's (2018) study was that the researchers had the unique opportunity to use previously restricted data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) to explore workload and workforce instability among child welfare workers. As noted in this section, scholars used quantitative methodology to collect data for their study. Considering previous research studies, this study extended knowledge in the field. In contrast to previous studies, this research study used a

qualitative inquiry to explore how the new child welfare worker appraised environmental stressors, gained insight into health outcomes associated with the job-related stressor, and understood resources the worker used to alleviate work-related stress. With the use of quantitative data from previous studies combined with the data for this study, the triangulation of the data has the potential to provide a holistic view of challenges newly hired child welfare workers encounter and the coping skills they use to alleviate work-related stress. Therefore, allowing future scholars to implement policies or resources to combat the issue of turnover in the child welfare workforce.

Job-Related Stressors Associated with Transitioning into the Professional Workforce

Transitioning into the professional workforce for novice professionals can present significant challenges for the new worker and has been well-studied in the nursing field (Cao et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2019; E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019; J. H. Kim & Shin, 2020; Rush et al., 2019; Widarsson et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2018) and educators (Fitchett et al., 2018; Keller-Schneider & Hericks, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020). However, scholars have expressed concern with the limited research or data on social workers transitioning from the academic setting to the workforce (Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2021). While researchers have used various methods to investigate challenges social work graduates encounter as they transition to the professional workforce, scholars collectively agreed that orientation/preparation (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Hunt et al., 2016; Wilke et al., 2020), supervision (Burns et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2017), and managing expectations versus realities of the

profession (Cao et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021) are common factors that influence one's transition.

Orientation and Preparation

Regarding preparation for employment and on-the-job training, the literature asserted that new graduates in the social work profession (Glassburn, 2020; Hunt et al., 2016) or newly hired frontline child welfare workers (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Burns et al., 2023; Wilke et al., 2020) have mixed reviews or perceptions of participants being adequately prepared to perform job-related tasks. In a study of twenty-seven new MSW graduates during their first 18 months of employment, the findings indicated that several new MSW graduates reported receiving good orientation; however, this was not the norm (Glassburn, 2020). For instance, one of the research participants received no orientation, and another reported receiving a high caseload after only one week of learning paperwork and shadowing (Glassburn, 2020). Consistent with the previous study, in Hunt et al.'s (2016) study on nine new BSW graduates as they transition from the role of a student into a professional role, the study's findings revealed that half of the respondents reported receiving "very good" orientation and felt well-prepared for their first social work job, two respondents felt that they were poorly trained or prepared. In contrast, the results of Grant et al.'s (2017) study on newly qualified social workers in Scotland indicated that most new social workers perceived that their social work education adequately prepared them for the workforce.

Congruent with the previous studies on mixed reviews from newly graduated social workers, the literature indicated that recently hired child welfare workers also

expressed varied reviews of being prepared for job-related tasks. In one study on recently hired child welfare workers who lived and worked in Florida, participants who remained at the agency for approximately 12 months were three times more likely to report a lack of preparedness in managing the immediate job requirements when compared to the participants who left the agency within the first 12 months (Burns et al., 2023).

Consistent with prior studies, Benton and Iglesias's (2018) study on the perception that child welfare workers who received the Title IV-Education incentive participants reported mixed feelings about being prepared to perform job-related tasks. 83% of participants who left the child welfare agency and 85 % who remained at the agency reported having mixed feelings concerning their perception of if their education adequately prepared the newly hired child welfare worker to perform job-related tasks (Benton & Iglesias, 2018, p. 268). Specifically, participants in Benton and Iglesias's (2018) study felt as if they were adequately prepared with technical skills (time management, critical skills, building rapport with clients, and policies/ laws/ codes; p. 272).

Perhaps the mixed reviews in the literature associated with new social workers feeling prepared to perform job-related tasks had something to do with social workers taking the first job offered or a panic job to address financial obligations (Glassburn, 2020, p. 148). Additionally, the inconsistency with child welfare workers' perceptions of feeling prepared to manage job-related tasks may have something to do with how the individual agencies adhere to the implementation or fidelity of the practice once the child welfare worker receives the standard preservice training (Wilke et al., 2020). For

instance, in some states, such as Florida, child welfare workers receive standard preservice training away from their home agency then once trained, the worker returns to their regular place of employment (Wilke et al., 2020).

A strength of Glassburn's (2020) and Hunt et al.'s (2016) study was that it provided insight into the unique experiences new social work graduates encountered when transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce; however, the scholars did not focus in on one specific area of employment for the new graduates. Whereas a strength of Benton and Iglesias's (2018), Burns et al. (2023), and Wilke et al.'s (2020) study was that it expanded the literature in exploring experiences of newly hired frontline child welfare workers; however, the participants in the studies were not all specifically new graduates; instead, the participants were new to the child welfare workforce. This study was valuable as it expanded the gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of new graduates, specifically new MSW graduates, as seen in Glassburn's (2020) study. This study also provided insight into first-year child welfare workers' experiences of stress as they transition from being a student into the professional workforce.

Supervision

Supervision plays an integral role in aiding social workers with the successful transition from being a student to a professional, as it ensures that the social worker is equipped with the essential skills to provide competent, appropriate, and ethical social work services and care to the client (NASW, 2013). The NASW (2013) asserted that "the supervisor is responsible for providing direction to the supervisee, which applies social

work theory, standardized knowledge, skills, competency, and applicable ethical content in the practice setting” (p. 6). While supervision is vital to developing new social workers, literature revealed that recent social work graduates’ experiences with leadership varied. In one study, researchers explored the reflections of newly hired child welfare workers who stayed or left the agency 12 months post-employment (Burns et al., 2023). The study’s findings showed that the participants’ experiences differed widely, with some identified as having a strong and supportive supervisor and others reported having poor supervisory support (Burns et al., 2023). 10% of the participants who remained at the agency reported having a positive, supportive experience, while 0.02% of the participants that left the agency reported a positive or supportive supervisor experience (Burns et al., 2023).

Consistent with findings in the previous study, in a mixed method study with newly qualified social workers in Scotland, the newly qualified social workers’ perceptions of their supervisory experience varied (Grant et al., 2017). In the quantitative portion of the study, the study’s findings revealed that 18% of participants reported an excellent experience, 28.9 reported a very good experience, 34.5% reported a satisfactory experience, and 13.8% reported a not very good experience; however, in the qualitative portion of this study, the findings revealed an “interesting dissonance” as participants expressed a more negative image of their perception of their supervisory experience (Grant et al., 2017, pp. 496-497). Furthermore, the study’s findings discovered that newly qualified social workers perceived the purpose of supervision as mainly to discuss caseload, case consultation, and training (Grant et al., 2017). In comparison with the

results of the previous studies, in Glassburn's (2020) study on new MSW graduates transitioning from school to the professional workforce, participants' perceptions of the supervision received "extremely" varied, with some participants reporting poor supervision while others shared that their supervision was extremely helpful (p. 149). In contrast, the findings in Choi et al. (2021) study showed that 89% of participants reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their level of general supervision received.

Scholars have used quantitative (Choi et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2017) and qualitative inquiries (Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Schelbe et al., 2017) to gain a holistic view of new social workers' graduates' and newly hired social workers' perceptions of their supervisory experience. Despite using multiple research methodologies to understand the phenomenon, the literature asserts that recently hired social workers and new social work graduates' perceptions of their supervisor experience varied, with some reported having a good experience (Burns et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2017). In contrast, others described having poor supervisory experience (Burns et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2017). This research study extended knowledge in the discipline in multiple ways. For instance, consistent with Glassburn's (2020) study, I also explored the transition from student to professional for a new MSW graduate in the U.S.; however, this study differed from previous studies as I sought to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific sub-group of MSW graduates (those who have elected to work in a public child welfare agency) experiences with transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce.

Social Worker Expectations

Kramer introduced the concept of “reality shock” in 1974, which was used to identify the conflict between the real-world practice settings and values taught in university nursing programs (Ankers et al., 2018; Kramer, 1974). Kramer (1974) defined shock as a construct of reality in which new graduates have a “social, physical, and emotional response” to the “unexpected, unwanted, or undesired” demands associated with novice professionals responding to the new workplace demands and responsibilities (p. 3). In one study, researchers explored 12 Swedish social work graduates’ journeys over their first eighteen months after graduating from a Bachelor of Science in Social Work program (Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). The study’s findings identified challenges associated with expectations versus reality, where participants identified experiencing a reality shock, where their previously held values of providing aid to oppressed and marginalized clients were replaced by the realities of organizational bureaucracy, policies, and budget cuts, which prevented the novice practitioner from delivering critical services to families in need (Tham & Lynch, 2019). Consistent with the previous study’s findings, in a study on new MSW graduates, participants identified experiencing a reality shock, where the participants thought or expected their job to consist of one thing, such as providing valuable therapeutic interventions to clients in need; instead, the participants shared that there was a harsh reality that the individual was to focus on productivity and billing (Glassburn, 2020).

Reality shock has also been observed among new graduates in the nursing profession (Cao et al., 2021; E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019). In one study, researchers

investigated the relationship between transition shock, resilience, empathy, and coping skills among 392 newly graduated nurses in China (Cao et al., 2021). The study's findings revealed that participants who reported higher levels of transition shock had a higher level of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. In contrast, in a different study, the researchers investigated the association between pre-graduation characteristics and the work environment for recently graduated nurses (E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019). The study's findings revealed that newly graduated nurses experienced transition shock in workload, a conflict between theory and practice, uncertainty with the nursing professional values, and difficulties with co-workers (E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019).

Transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce may present significant challenges for the new graduate, potentially leading to reality or transition shock (E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019). Kramer (1974) asserted that in rare cases, the new graduate's reaction to the gaps between expectation and reality is so intense that the recent graduate cannot endure the situation; therefore, the new graduate is likely to exit the field prematurely. As evidenced by the literature, social workers and nurses experience transition or reality shock, potentially impacting the new professional desire to remain in the field. In this research study, I explored the experiences of new MSW graduates as they transitioned from the academic setting to the professional workforce, as well as the resources the worker used to alleviate work-related stress.

Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are

appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Emotion-focused and problem-focused coping forms are the two central coping functions identified in the TMSC. Emotional-focused coping typically occurs when a person appraises the environment and realizes nothing can change threatening, challenging, or harmful environmental conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused forms of coping are utilized when the person has appraised the environment and realizes that implementing problem-solving skills would be amendable to changing, lessening, or eliminating the identified stressors from the environment (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Emotion-Focused Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that in emotion-focused forms of coping, a person cognitively changes or maneuvers an encounter to reduce the proposed threat, such as by making statements such as “I considered how much worse things could be” (p. 150). Behavioral strategies such as engaging in physical exercise or activities to get one’s mind off identified stressors, having an alcoholic beverage, meditating, seeking emotional support from others, or venting are examples of emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Scholars have identified new social workers’ emotion-focused coping strategies to manage multiple job-related stressors.

In one study, a recent MSW graduate worked at an agency for roughly a year and noticed significant dysfunctional communication patterns with colleagues and managers (Glassburn, 2020). As a result of the experience, the research participant stated that she found her voice at the agency and described how she became assertive and direct. The

research participant said, “Once it happened, I can’t go back into my shell now! I’m out. I’m gonna tell you how it is” (Glassburn, 2020, p. 153). Furthermore, the research participant stated, “I have learned that you cannot be a pushover because there are clients out there that will take advantage of you and will treat you as their punching bag if you don’t stand up for yourself” (Glassburn, 2020, p. 153). The research participant’s statements are examples of emotion-focused coping strategies, precisely cognitive maneuvers, as the participant changed her thought patterns to manage the intense emotion and perceived work-related threats.

Child welfare workers also receive peer and colleague support in managing multiple work-related stressors. In one study, child protective services social workers in Northern Ireland identified emotional support from colleagues and managers as a critical factor in their decision to remain at the agencies despite significant work pressures (McFadden, 2020). Moreover, in another study, emotional support from colleagues and peers was one of the most common strategies workers use to manage stressors of working in violence or harsh work conditions (Lamothe et al., 2018). In the study, a research participant who had worked in child protective services for two years stated, “... we can support each other; we go sit somewhere we can talk about it” (Lamothe et al., 2018, p. 316). In another study, child welfare workers in child advocacy settings identified exercising (going to the gym) and spending time outdoors as physical coping skills to manage job-related stress (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021).

Furthermore, the use of substances to manage stress is a common theme in literature. In a statewide study of 511 child welfare workers, researchers noticed that

approximately 5% or 98 respondents reported using substances (drinking alcohol, caffeine, or smoking/tobacco) to manage work-related stress (Griffiths et al., 2018). One participant stated, “I drink alcohol far more often and drink to the point of intoxication to try to forget about this job and the stress it creates” (Griffiths et al., 2018, p. 49). In another study, child welfare workers working in child advocacy settings identified using alcohol or illicit drugs to manage work-related stressors (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021).

Problem-Focused Coping

In addition to problem-solving to resolve a conflict or job-related stressor, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) asserted that problem-focused coping also encompasses an extensive collection of strategies directed inwardly to assist the person in managing or solving the problem. For example, they are coping strategies that are directed inward to address a problem or stress of motivational or cognitive change that aids in shifting one’s drive level, finding alternative or other ways to receive gratification for a job well done, minimizing ego involvement, or learning new skills to manage an identified stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping is career or job specific and may include direct ways to resolve a problem or stressors, such as identifying the specific tasks that must be accomplished, identifying obstacles that impede the process or hinders the desired job from being completed, and obtaining critical resources to ensure the task can be achieved, and so on (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Scholars have identified new social workers' problem-focused coping strategies individuals have used to manage multiple job-related stressors. For example, in

Glassburn's (2020) study on recent MSW graduates, a research participant identified having to minimize their ego and humble themselves and permit themselves to be "young, naïve, and inexperienced" and ask other colleagues questions and receive needed support (p. 149). In another study of new Bachelor of Science in Social Work graduates, research participants found alternative ways to receive gratification for a job well-done, such as feeling as if a client appreciates what they have done and establishing trust with the client (Tham & Lynch, 2019). Heavy workload and inadequate staffing are factors new graduates encounter in their first year that significantly increase job-related stress (Wong et al., 2018). New social workers employ several problem-focused coping strategies to manage a high caseload and limited time to complete tasks. In one study, twenty months post-graduation, research participants working in social service agencies, primarily in income support, identified staying at the office in the evening to complete work-related tasks, making it possible for the worker to work more efficiently during the daytime (Tham & Lynch, 2021). In another study, new MSW graduates identified using creative strategies to develop new programs, implement alternative approaches to accomplish tasks and revisit policies as examples of problem-focused coping strategies implemented to manage job demands and stressors (Glassburn, 2020).

Child welfare workers utilize various problem-focused coping skills to manage environmental job-related stressors. In one study, a research participant identified having to modify plans to be more "safety-conscious" when encountering violent or hostile clients, such as calling security for prevention rather than just calling security for intervention services, deciding to make an appointment if the client presents with violent

behaviors (Lamothe et al., 2018, p. 317). Furthermore, in another study, researchers identify taking breaks, not checking emails after work hours, and turning off work phones after working hours as problem-focused coping skills child welfare workers use to manage job-related stress (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021). While some literature has identified both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies for new social work graduates and child welfare workers, studies rarely explore the two factors simultaneously (recent social work graduates working in child welfare settings). Additionally, when coping skills are identified in the research, they tend to focus on positive or negative coping skills rather than classifying them using a theoretical framework.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed theories of stress. I reviewed scholarly literature on adverse impacts of prolonged stress on physical, emotional, and neurological functioning, explicitly focusing on workplace stress. Furthermore, I presented information on the TMSC while providing specific examples of how researchers used the model to systematically examine workers' experiences in stressful work environments, as well as how they used the TMSC to explore unique stressors new graduates encounter when transitioning from academic settings to the professional workforce. While scholars have used the TMSC to examine work-related stress in terms of emergency medical services workers, nurses, physicians, child welfare workers, and social workers, to date, there is limited to no published studies on use of the TMSC to explore experiences of social

workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 and worked at a public child welfare agency for 12 months or less after graduation.

Additionally, Chapter 2 includes a historical account of the development and implementation of CPS the U.S. I addressed daunting tasks child welfare workers encounter which led to work-related stress and emotion- and problem-focused coping skills that were used to manage this stress. There is literature on coping skills for recent graduates and child welfare workers to manage work-related stress.

In Chapter 3, I describe the rationale for why I selected to use the generic qualitative research design for the study. Second, I discuss my role, bias, and how bias was managed. Then I identify the research population, inclusion criteria, and specific strategies to recruit participants. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I address trustworthiness issues and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This generic qualitative study involved exploring experiences regarding work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transition from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. I addressed participants' experiences with transitioning from student to professional role a child welfare setting, stressors participants encountered at their places of employment, explored resources they used to manage job-related stress, acknowledge resources and skills participants want to help alleviate job-related stress. In this study, I addressed a gap in literature by using the generic qualitative research design along with the TMSC to address unique experiences of MSW social workers during their first year of employment at a public child welfare agency, and resources they used or desired to alleviate stress.

In this chapter, I outline the research questions, identify the research methodology, and examine the rationale for using this method. Secondly, I describe my role as the researcher, analyze potential biases, and provide an in-depth summary of how these biases are addressed and managed in the study. Then, I identify the population, sampling strategies, and rationale for selecting the sample size and describe data collection and analysis process. Furthermore, in this chapter, I identify trustworthiness issues (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) and describe how I ensured rigor in this study. I conclude this chapter by explaining how this study adhered to the three basic ethical principles according to the Belmont Report to protect the rights of human subjects.

Research Design and Rationale

In this study, I explored unique experiences new MSW graduates encountered during their first year working in CPS. Three research questions were used:

- RQ1: What environmental stressors do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency?
- RQ2: How do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 appraise environmental stressors and analyze available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment?
- RQ3: What coping skills do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 use to overcome environmental stressors, and what additional coping skills do they desire to aid in managing stress?

I used a generic qualitative design to answer research questions. With a generic qualitative research design, researchers seek to gain an in-depth understanding of human experiences by using qualitative methods to understand the phenomena (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). The design is used to address and interpret human experiences based on individual perceptions of experiences and how people construct meaning from their experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2022, p. 3). Mihas (2019) asserted generic or basic qualitative researchers primarily focus on solving a problem, identifying relevant themes,

and effecting change. Purposeful sampling techniques, open-ended individual or focused group interviews, and content or thematic data analysis strategies are primarily used to explore generic qualitative research questions (Frechette et al., 2020).

Generic qualitative inquiries can be divided into two subcategories: interpretive description and descriptive qualitative designs (Kahlke, 2014). Interpretive description was developed by Thorne et al. in 1997 to aid in bridging the gap between theory and practice, primarily in clinical settings. With interpretive descriptions, the researcher develops research questions and provides methodological and theoretical data that can be applied in practice (Kahlke, 2014; S. Thorne et al., 2004). Qualitative descriptive research designs are used when researchers want to describe a phenomenon (H. Kim et al., 2017).

For this study, I used the descriptive generic qualitative design to explore the research questions. H. Kim et al. (2017) emphasized most researchers use qualitative descriptive research to deliver a “straight description and comprehensive summary of the phenomenon of interest using participants’ language and staying close to the data” (p. 5). The qualitative descriptive research design was used to identify the subjective nature of the research problem, explore distinctive and diverse experiences participants possessed. In addition to being flexible, simple, and commonly used in research studies, qualitative descriptive research designs are used to explore phenomena or events where little information is known. There are limited to no published studies using the TMSC to explore unique experiences of social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 and have worked at a public child welfare agency for

12 months or less after graduation; therefore, the qualitative descriptive design was advantageous to this study as it aided in understanding participants' experiences in their unique context and providing knowledge on a topic where little information was known.

While generic qualitative designs have been criticized for being atheoretical, Roudsari (2019) emphasized that the mistaken belief that generic qualitative descriptive research designs are less theoretical is without merit. Instead, scholars argue that generic qualitative research inquiries allow researchers to use appropriate theoretical frameworks to answer the research questions and guide the study (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; S. E. Thorne, 2008). Collins and Stockton (2018) emphasized that a theoretical or conceptual framework is vital to the qualitative process, as it guides the method and research questions (theory of method, setting/participation, analytic approach, trustworthiness, epistemology, and the role of the researcher, the study's findings, discussion, and conclusion). In this research study, I used TMSC to guide the study and the research and interview questions.

In this research study, I used TMSC to guide the study and the research and interview questions. The first concept discussed in TMSC is stressors. In this study, a stressor is categorized as the experiences of social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 and have worked at a public child welfare agency for 12 months or less after graduation. The second concept discussed in TMSC is primary appraisal. In this study, primary appraisal identifies how workers perceive the stressors, such as irrelevant, positive, or stress-producing. The third concept discussed in TMSC is secondary appraisal. In this study, secondary appraisals explore workers'

perceptions of their available resources (proper orientation/preparation, adequate supervision, and knowledge of workplace demands) to manage work-related stressors. The fourth concept discussed in TMSC is coping. In this study, coping consists of the worker's coping skills to manage work-related stressors and stabilize the environment (problem- or emotion-focused). The fifth and last concept discussed in TMSC is reappraisal. This study's reappraisal phase identified how workers reevaluate their stressors and coping skills to manage job-related stress.

Additionally, a generic research inquiry was appropriate for this study. It allowed me to understand the participant's experience through the person's self-constructed meaning of the topic or phenomenon being studied (Billups, 2019). In contrast, a phenomenological research design was unsuitable for this research study, as the focus is on exploring an individual's lived experiences by uncovering the explored or subconscious aspect of those experiences (Billups, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, an ethnographic research method was unsuitable for this study because ethnography focuses on studying, finding, and understanding the entire culture group in its natural setting (Billups, 2019). Furthermore, a grounded theoretical framework was not appropriate for this study, as the focus of the study was not to generate or discover an emergent theory (Billups, 2019).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument used to collect data for the study, referred to as the researcher-as instrument (Billups, 2019). Billups (2019) asserted that the term researcher as an instrument identifies the emotional, physical, and cognitive

connection between the researcher and the study's participant. The researcher is close enough to the participant to make the link seamless. As a researcher plays a critical role in qualitative studies, I ensured that I was skilled at listening to participants, asking good probing questions, and being patient to allow participants to respond to interview questions (Billups, 2019, p. 24). To allow the participant's perspectives of their experience to drive the conversation (Billups, 2019), I assumed the role of a learner. I let the participant be the expert or narrators of their stories.

Researcher Bias

Individuals have been accustomed to thinking that bias is harmful or wrong for a research study; however, Billups (2019) argued that bias is viewed differently in a qualitative research design. In a qualitative research study, a productive bias occurs and is customary, as the researcher openly and intentionally seeks to understand the voices, perspectives, and details of the stories of the research participants (Billups, 2019). However, the researcher's bias can be damaging in a qualitative research study if the researcher fails to disclose their connections to or relationship with the focus of the research study or when the researcher allows their assumptions of the phenomenon to override the voices of the research participants (Billups, 2019). Bracketing is essential in a qualitative research design as it aids in offsetting the researcher's bias and ensures that research participants' voices are heard (Billups, 2019). Bracketing allows researchers to make their background known, disclose their interests and experiences with the topic, and acknowledge their connection to it (Billups, 2019).

Hence, I bracketed my background and relationship to the studied topic to provide

transparency. I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the state of North Carolina. I have experience working with children and families affected by intimate partner violence and child abuse/ neglect in multiple locations in the public and private arenas. I completed my Master of Social Work internship/ field placement in a local child welfare agency, where I worked in both intake and in-home services. Throughout my experience working in this setting, I noticed times when my colleagues and I felt stressed and overwhelmed with the tasks, roles, and responsibilities of working in child protective services. To my surprise, this incredible experience built my passion for continuing to serve and protect vulnerable youth and families impacted by abuse and neglect. One day, I seek to mentor, teach, and provide guidance for individuals entering the child welfare workforce and those working with children and families impacted by abuse or neglect; therefore, I am motivated to learn about the unique experiences new MSW graduates encounter during their first year when working in child protective services, mainly how the individual manages job-related stress.

I do not have any personal relationships with social workers who graduated with a Master in Social Work Degree within the past twelve months and have not worked at a public child welfare agency for twelve months, nor do I hold a supervisor or instructor position for potential research participants. Creswell and Báez (2020) emphasized that qualitative research takes considerable time, such as participating in lengthy interviews, sharing documents about their lives, or being observed in their place of work or home (p. 114). Therefore, Creswell and Báez (2020) asserted that researchers should give back to

participants for the time they used to participate in the study through reciprocity.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

This study consisted of social workers who graduated with their MSW degree within the last year from a program accredited by the Council of Social Work Education. Additionally, individuals in this study had worked in a public child welfare agency serving children and families impacted by abuse or neglect in the USA for less than 12 months. A purposeful sampling strategy was used in this study, as it allowed me to deliberately recruit and select volunteers for the study who had experienced the phenomena and aided in answering the research questions (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Kostere & Kostere, 2022). The participants' selection was based on answering yes to questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 on the Screening Checklist.

In this study, I interviewed 15 participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of first MSW graduates transitioning from the academic setting to their first year working at a public child welfare agency. I used several avenues to recruit volunteers (social media groups, email flyers to the public child welfare listserv, and Walden Participant Pool). All communication with the participants occurred through email, except for the initial and follow-up interviews. The initial and follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom.

In qualitative research designs, sample sizes can be determined by many factors, such as “the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, the type of qualitative design

you are using, the richness and extensive use of data, and the resources being used” (Creswell & Báez, 2020, p. 113). Saturation is crucial in determining the sample size in a qualitative study, whereas saturation occurs during the data collection when the researcher perceives that no new information has emerged from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Hennink et al., 2017; Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Kostere and Kostere (2022) asserted that in a generic qualitative dissertation, where the researcher uses individual interviews to collect data, the study’s recommended sample size is between eight to 15 research participants. Furthermore, Hennink et al. (2017) defended that nine interviews were adequate to achieve code saturation in a qualitative research study; however, sixteen to twenty-four interviews were needed to reach meaningful saturation where the researchers were able to develop a rich understanding of the phenomenon or issue (p. 591). In this study, I achieved data saturation at nine participants; however, I interviewed 15 participants to reach meaningful saturation.

Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews to collect data in this research study. Interviews are widespread and beneficial in qualitative research studies as they allow the researcher to capture a holistic, integrated view of a person’s perspectives, feelings, and experiences of a specific phenomenon (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). Interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconference, where each research participant was emailed a private link and passcode to join the meeting. I conducted one-on-one interviews with research participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal perceptions of the research participants that they would likely not share in a group setting (Billups, 2019;

Creswell & Báez, 2020). Furthermore, one-on-one interviews via the Zoom video platform allowed me to connect with the participants while watching their nonverbal communication. Videoconferencing provided a valuable opportunity to connect with participants, likely leading to the participants being open to sharing personal information. Additionally, Creswell and Báez (2020) stated that one-on-one interviews would likely yield the most information from research participants on the phenomenon.

I followed a standard interview guide to ensure the research study's consistency, credibility, and trustworthiness. The interview began with a brief (5-10 minute) introduction. I introduced myself, estimated how long the interview would last, and thanked the participants for taking the time to participate in the research study. As informed consent is an ongoing process, in addition to the written informed consent obtained by each participant prior to scheduling the initial interview, I also briefly reviewed critical concepts of informed consent on the day of the interview, such as the purpose of the study, entrance criteria, data collection process, potential risks, compensation, contact information for the researcher and Walden Research Participant Advocates, and the option to discontinue the interview or recording at any time without fear that someone would be mad or upset with them.

Next, I collected data on how the participants learned about the study. I obtained basic demographic information (gender, race/ethnicity, age, state worked in, months worked at the public child welfare agency, length of time one graduated with their MSW degree). Then I moved into the interview questions, developed using TMS theoretical

framework. I completed the interview by thanking participants for participating in the study. Lastly, I scheduled a follow-up meeting (member checking).

Like the standard interview guide, for the follow-up interview, I reviewed essential parts of the informed consent, such as the purpose of member checking, the data collection process, potential risks, compensation, contact information for the researcher and Walden Research Participant Advocates, and the option to discontinue the interview or recording at any time without fear that someone would be mad or upset with them. Then I reviewed themes that had emerged from their interview and asked participants if I had accurately reflected what they had said. If the answer was no, I asked participants to provide additional clarification to ensure I understood their experiences thoroughly. Lastly, I thanked the participants for participating in the research study.

Data Analysis

In this research study, I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis to explore the study's research questions. Braun and Clarke (2022) asserted that language matters and reflexive thematic analysis is not linear; therefore, the term phases were used to identify the analysis process rather than the term steps. In phase one, I familiarized myself with the dataset by reading and rereading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, and recording initial thoughts and reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

Next, I utilized the TMSO to organize and sort potential themes and codes. In phase two, I systematically went through the dataset with a fine-tooth comb and analyzed the data by identifying sections that appeared meaningful to the research question (Braun

& Clarke, 2022). In the third phase, I generated potential themes by comparing codes that emerged throughout the datasets that may offer a meaningful answer to the proposed research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35). In phase 4, I developed and reviewed candidate themes that were identified in phase three; themes that did not have enough data (quotes) to support them were removed, while other themes were broken into subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). In phase five, I defined and named the final themes; additionally, I conducted and wrote a comprehensive analysis for each piece while identifying the personal stories of research participants directly related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the sixth and final phase, I produced the report by describing the context associated with the themes and using participants' quotes to support the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I initially planned to use NVivo software to code data; however, I later decided to complete the coding manually, personal preference.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research studies, the term validity implies that the results of a study are believable or truthful (Creswell & Báez, 2020). The accuracy or truthfulness of a qualitative report can be established by the reader, research participants, and researchers (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Throughout history, there have been multiple lenses to view or show validity in a qualitative study; however, I utilized the Lincoln and Guba framework to establish validity or rigor for this research study, which consisted of four strategies or elements to achieve rigor in qualitative research, credibility (truth), dependability (consistency), and transferability (applicability; Billups, 2019, p. 27).

Credibility

Credibility in a research study is to establish confidence that the results are believable, truthful, and credible and adequately capture a holistic representation of the phenomena being studied from the perspective of the research participants (Billups, 2019; Forero et al., 2018). I used reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking to ensure the credibility of this research study. Reflexivity consists of positioning oneself in qualitative research, where the researcher identifies the individual biases, values, and experiences that one brings to the research and explains how the study may affect readers and participants (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Creswell and Báez (2020) asserted that there are two points that researchers should convey when engaging in reflexivity, talking about one's experiences with the phenomena being studied and explaining how experiences shape the researcher's interpretation of the phenomena. In the researcher bias section of this paper, I discussed my background as it related to the topic being studied and explored my interpretations of the phenomena.

Additionally, I used triangulation to address the credibility of this research study. Triangulation consists of building evidence from multiple sources to provide an in-depth and holistic picture of the phenomenon being studied (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). Specifically, I utilized information gathered in Chapter 2 from peer review journal articles and theories to build a case of evidence for the themes used in the study. Additionally, I used direct quotes from multiple participants to answer the research questions. Furthermore, I used member checking to enhance the study's credibility. Member checking is a validation strategy in which the researcher takes the final report,

specific descriptions, or themes back to the research participants and ask the participant if the themes or stories accurately reflect or represent what they have said or meant to say (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transferability

Qualitative research studies differ from quantitative studies as a qualitative research study aims to generate findings that other researchers can interpret in a similar setting or with other subjects instead of producing results that can be statistically generalizable (Billups, 2019). Providing thick descriptions is necessary for readers and future researchers to appraise how the phenomenon and place could be applied in a similar setting, under similar circumstances, with equal research participants (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). In this research study, I established transferability by recording conversations (audio and transcript) and using theory (TMSC) to offer a connection between codes/themes and participants' quotes (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). In addition, I provided a detailed description of the context and methodology used in the study and explained how the contexts shaped the research findings (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Dependability

Dependability is the third element of trustworthiness in a qualitative research study, which identifies techniques that a researcher uses to ensure that the study can be replicated and yield similar findings if performed in future studies (McGinley et al., 2021). Researchers use several strategies to ensure the dependability of a research study, such as triangulation, external audits, detailed descriptions of the study, and a stepwise

replication of the data (Forero et al., 2018; McGinley et al., 2021). I achieved dependability in this study by providing an in-depth description of the participants' selection logic, recruitment and participation procedures, and the method used to collect and analyze data to ensure that other researchers could follow the same procedural phases to replicate the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the last strategy to achieve rigor in a qualitative study. Confirmability generates confidence in the results of the study by ensuring that outcomes are free from bias and adequately and truthfully represent the perspective of the research participants (Billups, 2019; McGinley et al., 2021). While several strategies ensure confirmability in a research study, Billups (2019) argued that reflexivity and audit trails are the two most common methods to achieve rigor in a qualitative study. I used reflexivity to achieve confirmability in this study. In addition to providing a critical reflection on my role as a researcher, I also maintained an electronic reflexivity journal to allow me to continue self-reflection throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical Procedures

In this research study, I adhered to the three basic ethical principles presented in the Belmont Report to protect human subjects' rights, including the principle of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Office of the Secretary, 1979). Furthermore, I completed the CITI human subject's protection training, ensuring I was well-informed about protecting human subjects in a research study. The focus on respect for a person,

beneficence, and justice principles was achieved in this research study through informed consent. In the consent form, potential volunteers were notified that being in this study could involve some risk of minor discomforts encountered in daily life, such as sharing sensitive information. The consent form also provided potential volunteers with information on free or low-cost referral options if the volunteers experienced psychological distress during or after this study.

Additionally, potential volunteers were notified via consent of the possible legal risk of involvement in this study. For example, the volunteer may inadvertently disclose a violation of laws, including violations they commit or those committed by others. Furthermore, in the consent form, potential volunteers were notified that individuals would be asked to identify how they cope with stressors in their profession, which have the potential to pose minimal economic/professional risk. Additionally, potential volunteers were notified of the mandatory reporting requirements (If you report suspected child abuse, neglect, and/or dependency, I will be required to report the situation to the local Department of Social Services or the Department of Child and Family Services. With the protections in place, potential volunteers were notified that this study would pose minimal risk to their well-being.

The potential volunteers were notified via consent that I, as the researcher, am required to protect their privacy. Volunteers were told that their identities would be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Furthermore, potential volunteers were informed through consent that the researcher is only allowed to share their identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect their

privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). Potential volunteers were notified via consent that the researcher would not use their personal information outside this research project. Also, volunteers were told that the researcher would not include their names or anything else that could identify them in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers, so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Additionally, potential volunteers were notified via consent that data would be kept secure by storing information on an electronic encrypted disk and placed into a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home in a locked room. Data would be held for at least five years, as the university requires.

The potential volunteers were not a member of the vulnerable population. To prevent ethical issues, I did not know or hold any power over or have a professional or personal relationship with potential research volunteers. I addressed the justice principle in this research study by ensuring fairness and equality when selecting research volunteers. I used several avenues to recruit volunteers (social media groups, email flyers to the public child welfare listserv, and Walden Participant Pool). This study did not exclude volunteers based on their cultural, racial, social, or sexual orientation. Before gathering data for the research study, I obtained Walden's Institutional Review Board approval, 05-30-23-0668948.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained why I used a generic qualitative inquiry to answer the research questions. Secondly, I identified my role as the researcher and explained how

my biases were managed. Next, I described inclusion and exclusion criteria participants met to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. Social media and emails were used for recruiting participants.

Additionally, I explained how I used the TMSA to guide research questions, interview questions, and data analysis. In this chapter, I explained why a thematic analysis was used to analyze data. In addition, I identified the six-phase reflective thematic analysis approach I used to analyze data in this study. I discussed issues related to trustworthiness, as well as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and ensured rigor in this study. I concluded this chapter by addressing ethical procedures for protecting human subjects' rights. In Chapter 4, I present research findings with a specific focus on the setting, participants' demographics, characteristics that were relevant to the study, data collection methods, data analysis, and steps that were used to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in this study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this generic qualitative study, I aimed to explore experiences involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transitioned from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency serving children impacted by child maltreatment.

Additionally, in this study, I identified resources they used or desired to manage work-related stress. I used three research questions:

RQ1: What environmental stressors do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency?

RQ2: How do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 appraise environmental stressors and analyze available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment?

RQ3: What coping skills do social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 use to overcome environmental stressors, and what additional coping skills do they desire to aid in managing stress?

In this chapter, I describe the interview setting and participant demographics. Furthermore, in this chapter, I explain the data collection process and explore data collection techniques. Additionally, I describe credibility, transferability, dependability,

and confirmability. I conclude this chapter by summarizing answers to research questions and transitioning to Chapter 5.

Settings

A total of 15 individuals participated in the study. Three participants lived and worked in New York, 11 lived and worked in California, and one participant lived and worked in Texas. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded only. I conducted interviews in my home office, where all 15 participants could see me, a beige wall, and a large abstract mural. Twelve participants had cameras on for a portion of their interviews, where they were observed in private residential settings. During interviews, one participant requested to go to a different location, which appeared to have been outside on a private patio.

Demographics

15 individuals participated in the study. Seven participants identified themselves as male, and eight identified themselves as female. Even though I did not target African Americans or Blacks to participate, every participant identified themselves as Black or African American. They were between 22 and 32 years old, with a mean of 29. At the time of interviews, participants total time worked at the child welfare agency varied, with some working as little as 2½ months and others employed at the agency for 12 months. Eight participants learned about the study through social media (see Table 1).

Table 1*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	State	Time worked at the agency (months)	Time since graduation (months)	Learned about study
P1	32	F	Black	NY	4	9	Social media
P2	32	F	Black	CA	4s	7	Social media
P3	30	F	Black	TX	2 ½	7	Social media
P4	31	F	Black	CA	4	7	Social media
P5	29	M	Black	CA	4	7	Social media
P6	25	M	Black	CA	4	7	Social media
P7	30	F	Black	CA	4	7	Social media
P8	30	M	Black	CA	12	6	Peer
P9	32	F	Black	NY	2 ½	6 ½	Flyer
P10	22	M	Black	NY	4	7	Peer
P11	27	F	Black	CA	7	12	Peer
P12	32	M	Black	CA	8	6	Social media
P13	32	F	Black	CA	4	8	Peer
P14	29	M	Black	CA	6	12	Peer
P15	24	M	Black	CA	4	4	Peer

Data Collection

Data collection began on May 31, 2023, after receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 30 (#0530230668948). A flyer with information about the study was posted on several social media groups. Many groups required the flyer to be approved by the admin or group moderator before posting it. Approximately 200 emails were sent to the public child welfare listserv in the U.S. The Child Welfare Information Gateway maintains a public email list of each child welfare agency's point of contact for the U.S. The Child Welfare Information Gateway is served by the Children's Bureau, the Administration for Children and Families, and the U.S. DHHS.

As outlined on the flyer, individuals who were interested in the study contacted me via email or phone with a desire to participate. Once I received requests from

individuals interested in participating in this study, I emailed them the screening checklist. Once they sent response emails stating they met inclusion criteria, I emailed them consent forms. I provided participants with essential information related to the study, such as the purpose of the study, procedures, its voluntary nature, risks and benefits of participating in the study, compensation, my contact information, mandatory reporting laws, and what to expect on the day of the interview. Participants replied to emails stating the words, “I consent.” Once I received individual emails stating they consented to participate in the study, appointments were scheduled. Interviews took place between June 4 and June 17, 2023. Interviews were primarily conducted on Saturdays and Sundays; however, a few were conducted on Monday mornings before 10 a.m., Tuesday after 5 p.m., and Thursday after 5 p.m.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, where each participant was sent a private link and passcode to join the meeting. All participants were encouraged to turn on their cameras during interviews. Twelve participants agreed to turn their cameras on for at least a portion of interview. There was some slight background noise (television and children crying); however, this did not impede the data collection process. A structured interview guide was used to collect data for the study.

Additionally, I used active listening skills, such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and reflection, and I asked follow-up questions to clarify concepts that were discussed. For most participants, follow up interviews for member checking were scheduled at the end of the participants’ initial visit. Due to scheduling for myself and participants, some follow up interviews were rescheduled, and a reminder email was sent. A structured

follow up interview guide was used, and all 15 participants completed follow up interviews.

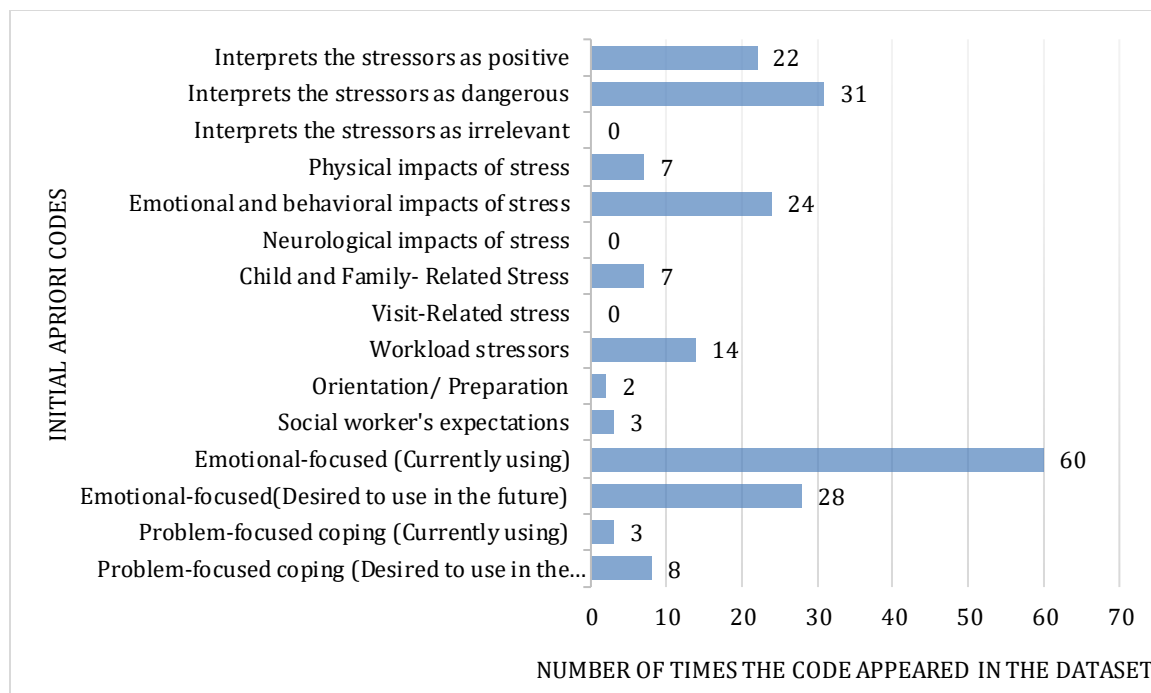
This study's primary method for recording data was a Sony digital recorder (PX270-Mono Recorder). The interviews lasted between eighteen to thirty minutes. A copy of the interview questions are in the appendix section. I transcribed the interviews. The data collection remained the same as those presented in Chapter 3. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during the data collection process. However, it is worth noting that in some states, such as New Jersey, "studies that seek to interview DCF staff need to be approved by our Research Review Committee" (Lilleston, personal communication June 13, 2023).

Data Analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis to explore the study's data in this research study. Braun and Clarke (2022) asserted that language matters and reflexive thematic analysis is not linear; therefore, the term phases were used to identify the analysis process rather than the term steps. I originally planned to use NVivo software, as discussed in Chapter 3; however, due to the programming or technology skills needed to use the NVivo software, like other scholars, I elected to use the built-in functions on Microsoft Word to complete the qualitative analysis for this research study (La Pelle, 2004). In the initial phase of the data analysis process, I assigned the participants pseudo-names to aid in protecting their confidentiality. Data was stored under the participants' pseudonyms. Next, I formatted the interview data into tables, which were organized and sorted by the study's theoretical framework (TMSC),

participants' pseudo-names, interview (moderator) questions, participants' responses, and the sequence number (utterance sequence of speaker changes; La Pelle, 2004).

In phase one, I familiarized myself with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, and recording initial thoughts and reflections in each transcript or raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). I used a deductive approach to identify sixteen Apriori codes for data analysis through an in-depth literature review (see Table 2). Next, I used an inductive approach to look for words, quotes, or phrases that could represent different aspects of the broad pre-set codes (Apriori codes) and the study's theoretical framework (TMSC) (Bergin, 2018). Words, quotes, or phrases representing different aspects of the broad pre-set concepts were identified as code and sorted under the appropriate Apriori codes. The data produced 178 codes based on 15 interviews.

Figure 1*Apriori Codes*

Apriori codes that did not appear in the data set, such as interpreting the stressor as irrelevant, neurological impacts of stress, and visit-related stressors, were removed. In the third phase, I transitioned from categories to themes by separating units of meaning from words and small phrases identified in the data set, which offered a meaningful answer to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As I transitioned from codes to categories, I systematically went through the dataset (interviews and codebook) with a fine-tooth comb to identify sections that appeared meaningful to the pre-set codes and would aid in answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The categories were grouped and regrouped multiple times to ensure maximum saturation and that the final categories accurately reflected the data collected and were consistent with the prior

literature, the theoretical framework, and the dataset (Bergin, 2018). I ended with 52 categories, which are included in Figure 2. In phase 4, I reviewed categories identified in the previous phase, the literature, and the theoretical framework to identify themes in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Seven themes and nine sub-themes emerged from the data. Figure 2 offered insight into how I moved from Apriori codes to categories to themes in this research study, while Table 2 briefly defined the themes and subthemes. In the sixth and final phase, which is listed in the result section of this paper, I presented the study's findings by describing the context associated with the themes and using participants' quotes to support the themes and offer insight into understanding the three research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Figure 2

Apriori Codes to Categories to Themes

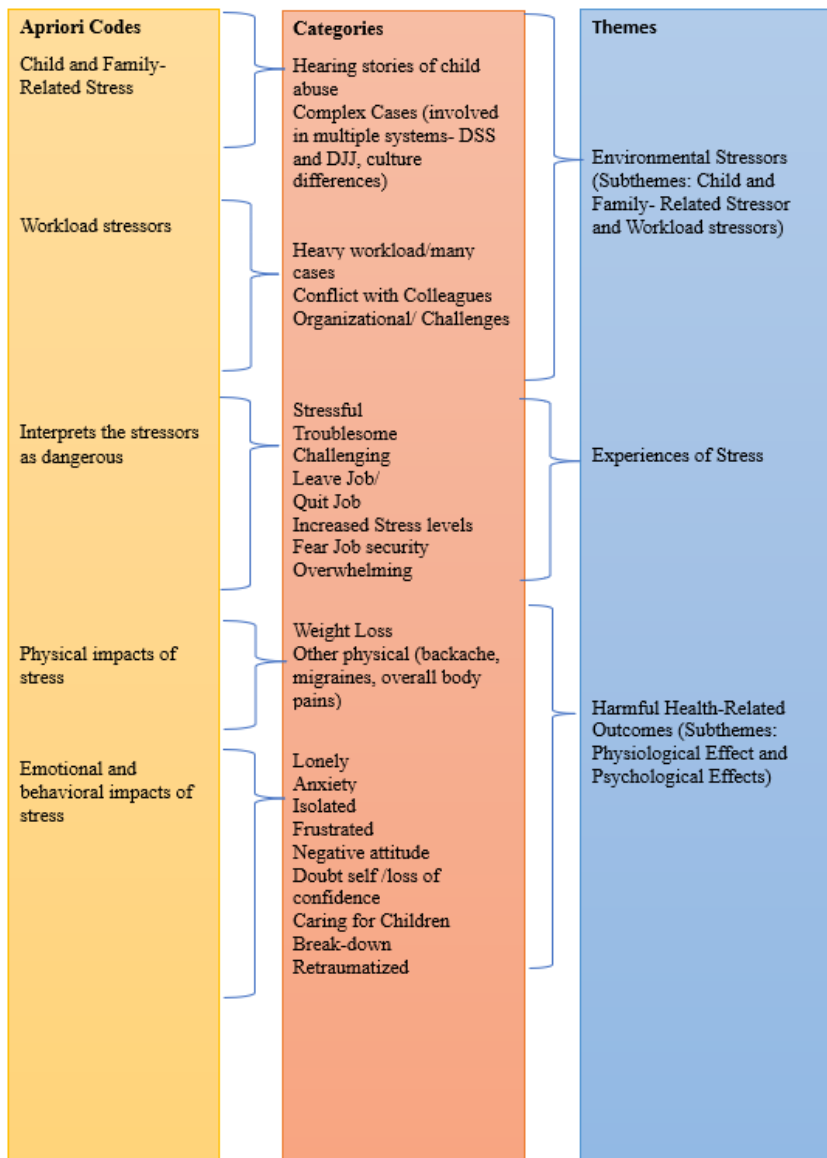
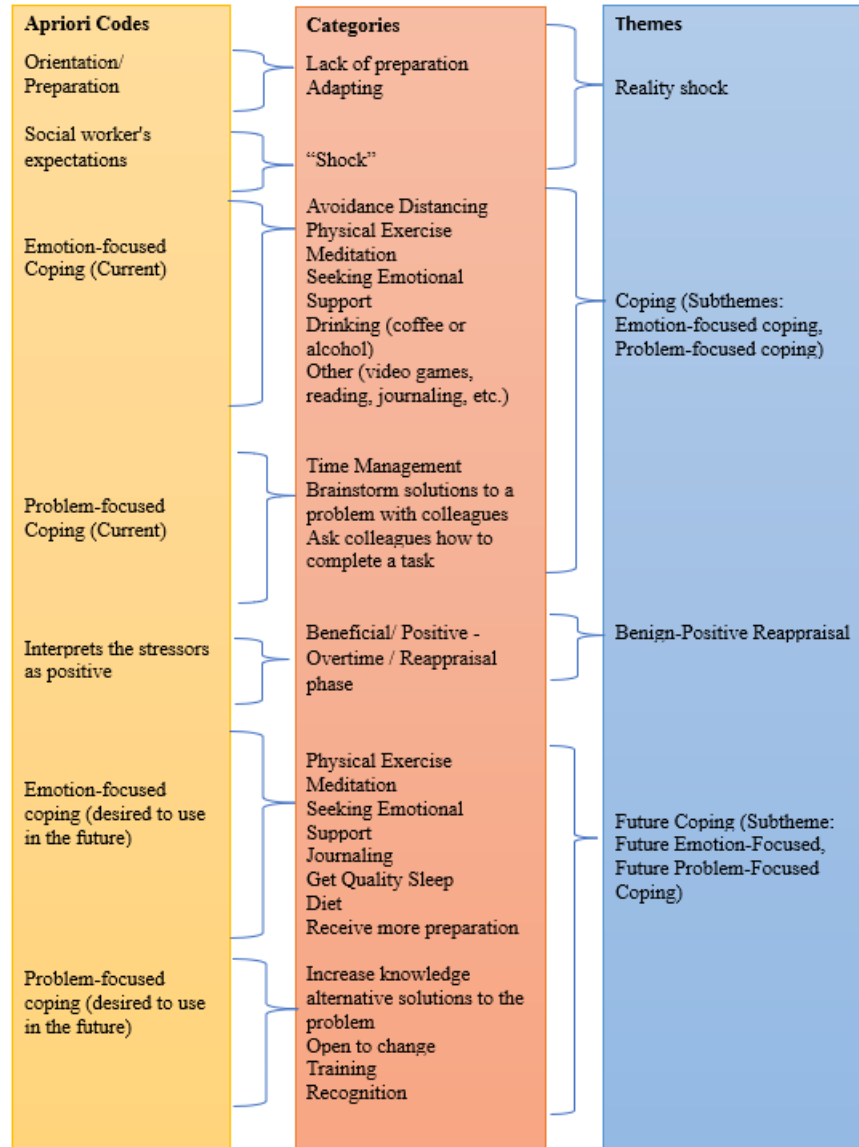


Figure 3

Moving from Apiori Codes to Themes



Additional Information

I did not have any discrepant cases; however, I had two cases where participants reported a reduced stress level immediately upon graduating. For instance, one participant stated that he was relieved from stress once he graduated and began to work at his new place of employment as he had "been able to meet some new friends in the organization"; however, he later stated that it was challenging for him to adapt to the new environment, and he had a difficult time connecting with the new team. Similarly, another research participant shared that her stress level had reduced since transitioning from the academic setting to her first year of practice; however, later in the interview, she stated multiple times that adjusting to the new work environment was stressful to balance, which she had considered quitting the job if her work environment did not change for the better. While this study focused on new graduates' first-year experience working in a public child welfare setting, future research is needed on recent graduates' initial experiences upon graduating, perhaps before securing employment.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I utilized the Lincoln and Guba (1985) framework in this study to establish validity or rigor, which consisted of four strategies or elements to achieve rigor in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility in a research study aims to ensure that the study results are plausible, honest, and trustworthy and effectively capture a rounded picture of the phenomena being studied from the viewpoint of the research participants (Billups, 2019; Forero et al., 2018). Transferability was established in this study by providing a thick description of the

research participants' interviews, how data was collected and analyzed, and identifying the connection between the theory (TMS), codes/themes, and participants' quotes (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). In a qualitative research study, dependability characterizes procedures that a researcher uses to ensure that the research study can be reproduced and yield comparable results if implemented in future studies (McGinley et al., 2021). Confirmability is essential in a research study, as it aids in ensuring that the results are free from bias while truthfully and adequately representing the perspective of the research participants (Billups, 2019; McGinley et al., 2021).

Credibility

In this study, I used reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking to ensure the credibility of this research study. In Chapter Two of this paper, I discussed my background related to the studied topic and explored my interpretations of the phenomena to achieve reflectivity. Additionally, I used triangulation to address credibility in this study by utilizing the literature in Chapter Two to develop themes and guide the data analysis process. According to Billups (2019) and Creswell and Báez (2020), triangulation consists of building evidence from multiple sources to provide an in-depth and holistic picture of the studied phenomenon.

Furthermore, member-checking ensures that the themes and stories developed accurately reflect or represent what they have said or are meant to say (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, participants were encouraged to turn on their cameras during the interview. I ensured that participants only participated once in the study, which allowed me to enhance the study's credibility.

Transferability

In this study, I established transferability in this study by providing a thick description of the research participants' interviews, how data was collected and analyzed, and identifying the connection between the theory (TMSC), codes/themes, and participants' quotes (Billups, 2019; Creswell & Báez, 2020). It is essential to note that the study results are not generalizable as each person's experiences, perception of the incidents, how they describe their experiences, and how a person views the world differs from person to person (Creswell & Báez, 2020). In this study, I aimed to achieve data saturation by conducting multiple interviews until data saturation was completed and the participant's responses provided meaningful insight into the studied phenomena. While data saturation reached ten participants, five more were interviewed to provide significant insight into the studied topic. Hennink et al. (2017) defended that nine interviews were acceptable to attain code saturation in a qualitative research study. Nevertheless, sixteen to twenty-four interviews were required to reach meaningful saturation where the scholars could develop a rich understanding of the phenomenon (p. 591).

Dependability

Scholars apply various approaches to maintain the dependability of a research study, such as triangulation, external audits, detailed descriptions of the study, and a stepwise replication of the data (Forero et al., 2018; McGinley et al., 2021). In addition to using triangulation, I achieved dependability in this study by thoroughly explaining the participants' selection process, recruitment, and participation procedures and describing how interviews were conducted. Additionally, to reach dependability in this study, I

completed an in-depth audit trail where readers were provided with a step-by-step data analysis outline incorporating visual diagrams and narratives.

For instance, Table 1 provided a brief excerpt of how the interview data were formatted into tables using Microsoft Word, including the participant's information, interview questions, responses, and the sequence numbers. Table 2 provides the name and description of the Apriori codes used in this study. Figure 1 provided the frequency of a word, quote, or phrase representing different aspects of the identified pre-set codes in the data. Table 3 is located in the appendices and provides the name and description of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Figure 2 provided insight into how the Apriori codes were sorted into categories and how the categories were sorted into themes. An in-depth audit trail will allow other scholars to follow similar procedures to duplicate the study.

Confirmability

In this study, I achieved confirmability by using participants' direct quotes to identify themes and quotes. Furthermore, I used active listening skills, such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and reflection, and asked follow-up questions to ensure I understood the research participants' responses to interview questions. The reason and rationale for why a specific code or theme was used were clarified throughout the research paper. Additionally, to provide a critical reflection on my role as a researcher, I maintained an electronic reflexivity journal to allow me to continue self-reflection throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results

I used three research questions in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomena. RQ1 involved environmental stressors social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency. RQ2 addressed how social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 appraised environmental stressors and analyzed available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment. RQ3 addressed coping skills social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 use to overcome environmental stressors, such as changing the situation (problem-focused) or one's relationship to the situation (emotion-focused). Additionally, in the third research question, I explored what additional coping skills workers desire to use in the future to aid in managing stress. In this study, I used the TMSC to guide the research questions, interview questions, and lens of how the research questions were answered.

Theme 1: Environmental Stressors

Workload Stressors

In this study, participants commonly identified challenges with having a heavy caseload, conflict with colleagues/supervisors, and difficulties adapting to the organizational climate (N=3) as workload stressors (N=10) new graduates encountered as they are transitioning from the academic setting to one's first year working at a public child welfare agency. In this research study, workload stressors are defined as feeling

overworked, high caseloads, unsupportive colleagues, unsupported supervisors, and conflict (Burns et al., 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020).

In this study, Jill, a 32-year-old, stated frustratingly that her heavy workload adversely impacted her ability to effectively manage a complex case involving a juvenile with a criminal history who frequently ran away from his home and had a drug addiction. Staff shortage appeared to be a key reason for child welfare workers having a high workload, as Jane shared her irritation with having so many cases to handle at one time as her agency had not hired enough staff. In addition to having heavy workloads, individuals in the study echoed their anger and irritation of being looked down upon by colleagues or supervisors due to being new employees and graduates. Mark, a child welfare worker who had worked at the agency for four months, noted that people doubted his ability to perform job-related tasks because he was a new employee and graduate. Unfortunately, like Mark, new child welfare workers identified having strained relationships with peers that led to significant workplace conflict and made new workers feel alone and hesitant to ask for much-needed help.

Child Related Stressors

As part of their jobs, child welfare workers are regularly exposed to firsthand accounts of child physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and significant neglect, which participants in this study (N=5) identified as a substantial environmental stressor one experienced during their first year working at the public child welfare agency. In this research study, child-related stressors are defined as child welfare worker making the

decision to remove a child from their home, seeing children who had been severely abused, recommending that the court system terminate a parent's parental rights, observing children's harsh living conditions, and experiencing a child's death on one's caseload or a colleague caseload, repeatedly exposed to hearing a client's trauma or working with parents or family members with mental health illnesses, such as substance abuse, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019, p. 199; Rienks, 2020).

Isabelle, a female who had worked in child protective services for seven months, tearfully stated that hearing children share traumatic events that had happened to her as a child opened old wounds that she thought had healed and led to a significant amount of stress. Meanwhile, Luke, Mary, and Hope echoed the difficulties of hearing cases of child abuse and neglect, adding, "It is not only one individual; it is mainly many cases..." In addition to hearing firsthand accounts of child maltreatment, Luke hesitantly revealed that he had difficulty connecting and establishing therapeutic relationships with individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds, adversely impacting his abilities to work and "understand some patients effectively."

Theme 2: Experiences of Stress

The second theme that emerged in the study was experiences of stress. This theme is defined as a person initially appraising the environmental stressors (workload and child-related) to be threatening (a person anticipates that the environmental stressors will lead to injury, illness, damage to self-esteem, or the loss of a loved or valued person) in which the person uses negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and anger to categorize

the event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this study, participants commonly appraised the environmental stressor as troublesome, challenging, or stress-producing (N=9), which adversely impacted the new workers' physical, emotional, and psychological health and led to participants considering quitting their job or leaving the agency within the first 12 months of employment. Despite having a strong desire and passion for working with children who have experienced abuse or neglect, participants in this study (N=9) commonly reported a desire to leave the agency due to work-related stress if the environmental stressor or situation did not change. After hearing stories of child maltreatment, Isabelle softly stated that she had been "thinking about quitting work" as she was discouraged. She felt overwhelmed by the stressors of being a new graduate working in her first year at a public child welfare setting. Similarly, individuals such as Robert stated that he had ruminating thoughts of quitting his job, which caused him to wake up at night and contemplate if working at the agency was genuinely beneficial.

Theme 3: Harmful Health-Related Outcomes

Although the second research question did not specifically focus on health-related outcomes associated with environmental stressors, the third theme that emerged from the data was harmful health-related outcomes. A harmful health-related outcome is an impairment in a person's physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health, contributing to a decline in the person's social, occupational, or other areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). This theme is broken into two sub-themes: (a) physiological effects and (b) psychological effects.

Physiological Effects

In this study, the physiological effect of stress is defined as the way a person's body physically responds to stress, such as weight gain, weight loss, fatigue/ exhaustion, high blood pressure, headaches, developing blood clots in one's leg, breaking out in hives and sores, nervous ticks, loss of large patches of hair, and mouth ulcers (APA, 2021; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Ranjbaran et al., 2013; Sutton et al., 2008; Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Even though the physical consequences of stress varied among research participants in this study, participants (N=7) identified experiencing physical impairments, such as weight loss, migraines, and worsening of previous back pains. Elizabeth added that her health deteriorated because of a momentous amount of work-related stress.

Psychological Effects

In addition to the physiological effects of job-related stress, participants in this study (N= 10) identified the psychological effects of work-related stress. In this study, psychological effects are defined as the harmful or adverse mental or emotional impact of stress, such as negative changes in behaviors, quickly angry or snappy, unexpected fluctuation in mood, screaming or yelling at a loved one, increased alcohol consumption, sleep disturbance, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, avoiding social situations, panic attacks, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and burnout (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021; Sutton et al., 2008; Tang & Li, 2021). As a result of stress, individuals in this study described significant impairments in their mental and emotional health, such as feeling

anxious, worried, frustrated, sad, and lonely. Mary added, "Of course, it takes a toll on you emotionally, and you start to feel sad, and you're down." Unfortunately, due to the overwhelming stress associated with being a new child social worker working in a public child welfare setting, participants, such as Seth, identified having a "mental health breakdown," whereas Isabelle stated that her "psychological health is so disturbed" in which her "mind was not at peace at all."

Theme 4: Reality Shock

Transitioning from the academic setting to the professional workforce presented a significant stressor for participants in this study, as social workers analyzed that they did not have the available resources (proper orientation/preparation, adequate supervision, and knowledge of the workplace demands) to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment, where participants (N=5) described the experiences as a reality shock. Reality shock is defined as a construct of reality in which new graduates have a social, physical, and emotional response to the unexpected, unwanted, or undesired demands associated with novice professionals responding to the new workplace demands and responsibilities (Kramer, 1974, p. 3). Jane shared that she didn't expect to experience many job-related stressors as she began her first year working at the child welfare agency, in which she stated, " It was a shock for me. I didn't expect to feel overwhelmed." Not feeling ready or prepared to handle job-related tasks associated with making life-altering decisions about the health and safety of abused and neglected children was a shared experience of individuals in this study. Christopher noted the difficulty in transitioning from theory to practice when completing

job-related tasks. While each participant's experiences differed slightly, new child welfare workers, particularly individuals in this study, described not feeling prepared or poorly equipped to handle the demands of working in a public child welfare agency.

Theme 5: Coping

Coping is "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). In this research study, coping was broken down into two subthemes, namely (a) emotion-focused coping and (b) problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping is the cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Examples of emotion-focused coping include engaging in physical exercise to get one's mind off a problem, meditating, having a drink, venting anger, and seeking emotional support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 151). Problem-focused coping strategies are similar to methods used for problem-solving, where the individual recognizes or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weight the alternative and solutions to address the presenting problem, and makes a choice on whom to address the issue (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152).

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping was the primary method for participants in this study (N=15) to alleviate work-related stressors associated with new graduates transitioning from the academic setting to their first year of practice at a public child welfare agency.

Avoidance and distancing oneself from others was a key element participants (N=8) used in this study to aid in relieving stressors associated with being a new graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency. As we live in a digital age, where many work-related tasks can be accomplished on smartphones, Jasmine, a new child welfare worker, said, that she turns off her phone and take off the alerts to aid in distancing herself from work-related stressors. Avoidance or distancing oneself from work-related stressors allowed Jeremiah time to free his mind while also offering Jill an opportunity to detach herself from the situation to avoid getting disappointed over situations that she cannot control.

Additionally, seeking emotional support from family, friends, and professionals was a shared coping skill participants in this study (N=9) used to aid in relieving stressors associated with being a new graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency. Mary sighed with relief, “I would call my parents. I would call them even though they weren't physically there. I'll just call them and talk to them about it. And that would make me feel a bit better, even though they won't give you like solutions. But talking to someone does help for me.” In addition to talking with family members and friends, Robert, Jill, Mark, and Jane each described the value and benefit of seeking emotional support to talking to colleagues and peers throughout the workday as it provides the new worker with an opportunity to vent their concerns with someone who understands the unique challenges child welfare workers encounter daily. In addition to seeking emotional support from family members, friends, and colleagues, this study (N=5) also utilized formal and informal therapeutic services as a coping skill to alleviate job-related

stressors. Hope shared that talking about it with “someone who doesn't expect you to be OK and without fear of being berated, stigmatized, or being talked about” was advantageous as it assisted her with managing intense emotions related to job-related stress.

In addition to seeking emotional support from family, friends, colleagues, peers, and therapists, participants in this study commonly engaged in physical activities (N=8) and meditation (N=3) to manage work-related stress. Mark shared that initially, after a challenging day at work, he would go back home, lock himself in the home, and avoid interacting with people, which made him feel sick; however, he shared that he began to go on a bicycle ride for around an hour instead of staying home and it was helpful as he was able to meet some new friends on the road and enjoy himself, which caused him to come back home refreshed. Additionally, in this research study, participants identified engaging in physical activities, such as cycling, going to the gym, taking nature walks, and playing games as strategies to alleviate work-related stress. While it was uncommon (N=1), Robert, a 24-year-old male, stated that after work, he drinks liquor to handle work-related stress.

Problem-Focused Coping

In addition to using emotion-focused coping strategies to relieve the stress associated with being a new MSW graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency, participants (N=7) identified utilizing problem-focused coping to reduce stress. To aid in learning job roles and responsibilities, participants in this study identified consulting with colleagues and senior leaders on the efficient way to perform job-related

tasks. As a result of multiple competing tasks, deadlines, and heavy caseloads, Jeremiah shared that he uses proper time management to handle the demands of working in a public child welfare setting.

While problem-solving skills are typically an objective and analytical process that focuses specifically on the environment, problem-focused coping can be directed inward, such as shifting the level of aspirations, learning new skills, finding alternative channels for gratification, and learning a new skill (Kahn et al., 1964, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Mary shared that she has taken up hobbies like crochet and drawing to assist her with taking her mind off the stressors associated with being a new graduate working in a public child welfare setting. Other participants, such as Hope, found alternative channels for gratification, such as thinking about the positive impact that her work may have on a child in 20 years.

Theme 6: Benign-Positive Reappraisal

The sixth theme that emerged from the data was benign-positive reappraisal. In this research study, benign-positive reappraisal is defined as perceiving their interaction with the environment as pleasing after the person initially appraised it to be stress-producing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Despite the challenges associated with being a new graduate and working at a public child welfare agency for less than one year, individuals in this study (N=15) reappraised the environmental stressors as positive or beneficial. When reflecting on their experience, participants commonly described their initial experience transitioning from school as a new child welfare worker as troublesome and challenging; however, over time, the participants commonly agreed that their

experience was beneficial and positive as it helped them to grow personally and professionally. Participants like Seth said it was beneficial for his career as it provided him with some experience. Robert shared that reflecting on the experience provided him with a positive mindset, and Elizabeth stated that it helped her to be more optimistic when encountering similar job-related stressors in the future.

Theme 7: Future Coping

The seventh and final theme that emerged from the data was future coping. In this study, future coping is defined as a person reviewing coping strategies previously used to determine what, if any, coping methods the person would use in the future to alleviate work-related stress. In this research study, future coping was broken down into two subthemes, specifically (a) emotion-focused coping and (b) problem-focused coping.

Emotion-focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping was the primary coping strategy participants in this study (N=12) desired to use in the future to alleviate or lessen environmental stressors associated with being a new MSW graduate transitioning from the academic setting to their first year of practice at a public child welfare agency. As previously mentioned, emotion-focused coping is the cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150). Participants frequently reported a desire to receive professional counseling for emotional support, as a counselor provided the new child welfare worker with a "trusted" person to speak with about multiple life stressors; however, participants' comfort

levels with seeking therapeutic service varied. While Elizabeth and Jane confidently reported wanting to receive psychological help to manage job-related stressors, Isabelle softly stated that she wanted to attend therapy to process work-related stressors; however, she, like many other individuals, questioned if she had the courage to follow through. Although participants noted a desire to receive professional support to manage stressors associated with being a new child welfare worker, finances may be a barrier for some to obtain the resources. To address this barrier, Elizabeth stated it would be nice if the agency offered free mental health support to staff. In addition to seeking professional therapeutic services, as participants spend 40+ hours at work each week, new child welfare workers in this study reported a strong desire to reduce the time they spend alone and make a more significant effort to connect with other individuals, colleagues, and peers in the work setting.

Problem-Focused Coping

Furthermore, participants in this study (N=7) noted a desire to use problem-focused coping strategies in the future to aid in reducing environmental stressors associated with being a new MSW graduate transitioning from the academic setting to their first year of practice at a public child welfare agency. As previously mentioned, problem-focused coping is a method used for problem-solving, where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weight the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and makes a choice on whom to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152). As Jermaine reflected on his experience as a new child welfare worker, to improve the quality of care that he

provided to child welfare participants, he noted a strong desire to increase his understanding of working with different people by reading various articles and other resources. Similar to Jermaine, other participants noted a desire to continue to expand their knowledge on the field and human behaviors to assist them with being better prepared to handle job tasks and how to implement effective problem-solving skills. Like Jermaine, other participants noted a desire to continue to expand their knowledge on the field and human behaviors to assist them with being better prepared to handle job tasks and how to implement effective problem-solving skills. Although it was not commonly reported among participants, it is important to note that a participant in this study empathized with the value of child welfare agency recognizing employees outstanding work as it will aid in building the workers confidence and improving the overall morale of the department.

Summary

In this generic qualitative research study, 15 participants identified environmental stressors social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encountered as they transitioned from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency. Work-related and child-related stressors are the two common environmental stimuli participants encountered when transitioning from academic settings to their first year at the public child welfare agency. Additionally, participants provided valuable insights regarding how they appraised environmental stressors and analyzed available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment. During the primary

appraisal phase, participants identified environmental stressors as troublesome, challenging, and stress-producing, adversely impacting new graduates physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically.

Furthermore, participants provided essential insights regarding coping they used to overcome environmental stressors. In this study, participants identified using emotionally focused coping with relieving stress associated with being a new MSW graduate and working in a public child welfare setting. Although participants mostly used emotional-focused coping to relieve stress related to being a new MSW graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency, some participants reported using problem-focused coping to reduce stress, with a primary focus on problem-solving.

During the reappraisal phase, participants agreed that stressful experiences and situations are beneficial after applying problem- and emotional-focused coping skills. Overall, using the TMSC was helpful to answer the three research questions and provide an in-depth understanding of new MSW graduates' experiences transitioning from the academic setting to their first year at the public child welfare agency. In Chapter 5, I introduce and interpret findings. In addition, I discuss the study's limitations, recommendations for future researchers, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Transitioning from student to professional can be stressful and challenging. Elevated stress levels can lead to poor health-related outcomes for new graduates. Studies have explored challenges novice teachers and nurses encountered as they transitioned from academic settings to the professional workforce. To aid in closing the gap in literature, in this study, I used a generic qualitative design to explore experiences and perceptions involving work-related stress among social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transitioned from the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. Additionally, data gained from the study were used to identify resources they used or desired to manage work-related stress.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in this study to address perspectives, feelings, and experiences involving a specific phenomenon. One-on-one interviews were instrumental in this study, as one-on-one discussions yield essential information that participants may not have shared in a larger setting. I used the TMSC to guide this study.

A key finding of this study was that participants initially appraised their interactions with the environment (child and work-related stressors) to be challenging and stress-producing, contributing to impairments in terms of their psychological and physiological health. To mitigate or lessen job-related stressors, participants implemented various emotion and problem-focused coping strategies which contributed to being able to make complex and life-changing decisions for the health and safety of abused and

neglected children while also learning their roles in terms of organizational structure and establishing alliances with colleagues and peers. Participants in this study identified various emotion and problem-focused coping strategies they would like to continue to use to alleviate environmental stressors associated with being new graduates working in a public child welfare setting.

In this chapter, I interpret findings, discuss the study's limitations, and provide recommendations for further studies. Furthermore, I described how this study could lead to positive social change. I conclude this chapter by providing a comprehensive summary.

Interpretation of the Findings

Study findings confirmed challenges associated with transitioning from academic settings to the professional workforce, first year challenges, occupational stress, adverse health outcomes, and coping strategies for individuals in the helping profession. Findings in this study also extend the knowledge in the discipline. In addition, findings of this study extended knowledge in the discipline regarding resources participants used or desired to manage work-related stress.

RQ1 involved environmental stressors social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 encounter as they transition from student to professional during their first year at a public child welfare agency. Workload and child-related stressors were typical environmental stressors they encountered when performing job-related tasks. In this study, workload stressors included experience of feeling overworked, high caseloads, unsupportive colleagues, unsupported supervisors, and

conflict with supervisors and staff. Participants in this study identified high caseloads as their primary source of work-related stress. High caseloads are an area of stress for new child welfare workers (Burns et al., 2023; Schelbe et al., 2017). Like the participants in this study, novice nurses and teachers have also identified heavy workloads as a common challenge during their first year of practice.

Beyond high caseloads and being overworked, participants frequently reported feeling unsupported, criticized, and demeaned by colleagues and supervisors. Hostile work environment was a significant stressor for participants. New child welfare workers reported being bullied by leaders, lack of support from colleagues and supervisors, and not being responded to by staff members (Burns et al., 2023; Schelbe et al., 2017).

In this study, child-related stressors resulted from making decisions to remove children from their home, seeing children who had been severely abused, recommending court systems terminate parents' parental rights, observing children's harsh living conditions, experiencing death of children, repeated exposure to hearing clients' trauma, and working with parents or family members with mental health illnesses, such as substance abuse disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression. Russ et al. (2020) reported high stress levels among child welfare workers in Australia due to being repeatedly exposed to hearing a client's trauma. According to Oates (2019), child welfare workers who reside in the U.S. frequently reported distress when hearing stories involving child maltreatment. Findings in this study extended knowledge in the discipline, as it provided insights regarding challenges new child welfare workers encounter when addressing firsthand accounts of child abuse and neglect.

Participants in this study did not identify visit-related stressors such as conducting home visits in high-crime areas or being physically, verbally, or emotionally threatened by clients. Visit-related stressors are familiar environmental stressors child welfare workers regularly encounter (Burns et al., 2023; Harrop & Ioakimidis, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018). This may be because participants had not experienced being threatened or conducted home visits in high-crime areas as they had been employed at the agency for a short period. Alternatively, this may be because participants had normalized exposure to threatening environments or violence as part of the job; therefore, they did not identify visit-related stressors as a challenge encountered.

RQ2 addressed how social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 appraised environmental stressors and analyzed available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment. In line with other studies (García-Martín et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2020), in this research study, participants commonly appraised the environmental stressors endured during their first year at the agency as challenging and stress-producing. The findings in this study were consistent with the conclusions of various studies as first year teachers appraised the working environment to be difficult and stress-producing during their first year of practice (McCarthy et al., 2020), and new nursing graduates described their first year of practice to be challenging and stressful (García-Martín et al., 2021). While this study sought to explore how new social work graduates appraised environmental stress associated with their first year working in the

public child welfare setting, the adverse implication of work-related stress (thoughts of quitting the job or adverse health-related outcomes) emerged from the data.

Unfortunately, due to a significant amount of work-related stress, participants in this study noted a strong desire to leave the job or quit within their first year working at the public child welfare agency. The findings of this study were congruent with the literature, as various studies found that first-year child welfare workers experience a significant amount of stress associated with high caseload and workplace demands, which resulted in high levels of turnover in the child welfare workforce (Burns et al., 2023; Schelbe et al., 2017). Child welfare workers are exiting the field because of work-related stress; it is worth noting that the high turnover and burnout adversely impact vulnerable and marginalized children as it increases the likelihood that the child will re-enter the foster care system once returning home (Casey Family Programs, 2017, p. 2).

Undoubtedly, new social workers, specifically MSW graduates working at child welfare agencies, are presented with several challenges that may lead to stress, which have the potential to lead to harmful health-related outcomes. Hence, the harmful health-related outcomes experienced by research participants, specifically physiological and psychological effects, were critical findings in this study. In this study, the physiological effect of stress is defined as the way a person's body physically responds to stress, such as weight gain, weight loss, fatigue/ exhaustion, high blood pressure, headaches, developing blood clots in one's leg, breaking out in hives and sores, nervous ticks, loss of large patches of hair, and mouth ulcers (APA, 2021; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Ranjbaran et al., 2013; Sutton et al., 2008; Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

Migraines, weight loss, and worsening of previous medical conditions were adverse implications of stress that many participants in this study encountered during their first year of practice. Regarding weight loss, the findings of this study extend the knowledge in the discipline, as the findings in prior studies asserted that child welfare workers (Griffiths et al., 2018), child welfare supervisors (Griffiths et al., 2019), and social workers (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021) reportedly gained weight due to work-related stress. Experiencing migraines or headaches was a key physical health consequence experienced by a participant in this study, and the findings are congruent with the literature as participants in various studies identify headaches as a common adverse physical effect of job-related stress (Griffiths et al., 2018, 2019).

In addition to the physiological implications of stress, more than half, or 66% of participants in this study, reported adverse psychological implications associated with work-related stress. In this study, psychological effects are defined as the harmful or adverse mental or emotional impact of stress, such as adverse changes in behaviors, quickly angry or snappy, unexpected fluctuation in mood, screaming or yelling at a loved one, increased alcohol consumption, sleep disturbance, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, avoiding social situations, panic attacks, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and burnout (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021; Sutton et al., 2008; Tang & Li, 2021). Feeling nervous, frustrated, anxious, sad, and lonely were several examples of psychological effects of stress that participants in this study frequently experienced working in their first year in a public child welfare setting. The same psychological effects were reported

by various helping professionals who serve children impacted by child maltreatment, such as child welfare workers (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021), social workers (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Zychlinski et al., 2021), child welfare workers in child advocacy center settings (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021), and law enforcement officers in a child advocacy center (Beer et al., 2023). For instance, in Griffiths et al.'s (2018) study, frontline public child welfare workers reported several emotional symptoms associated with job-related stress, such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Interestingly, like individuals in this study, law enforcement officers who work in a child advocacy center reported feeling depressed and identified the psychological toll that working with abused and neglected children had had on their health (Beer et al., 2023).

Transitioning from the educational setting to the professional workforce presented a substantial stressor for participants in this study, as the new child welfare worker did not perceive that they had the available resources (proper orientation/preparation, adequate supervision, and knowledge of the workplace demands) to manage the job-related task effectively. Participants referred to the lack of resources available to meet the new job demands as a "shock." Kramer (1974) defined *shock* as a construct of reality in which new graduates have a "social, physical, and emotional response" to the "unexpected, unwanted, or undesired" demands associated with novice professionals responding to the new workplace demands and responsibilities (p. 3). Throughout the literature, findings in various studies reported high levels of transition shock for first year nurses (Cao et al., 2021; E.-Y. Kim & Yeo, 2019), new Bachelor of Science in Social

Workers (BSW; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021), and novice MSW (Glassburn, 2020); however, there is limited to no studies that use the TMS framework to explore the experiences of new MSW graduates working in their first year at a public child welfare setting; therefore, the findings of this study extend knowledge in the field and aided in closing a gap in the literature.

The findings in this study indicated that reality shock occurred when participants in the study did not feel prepared or perceive that they had the available resources to handle the complexity of job-related tasks associated with protecting and providing service to children who had experienced significant physical, emotional, and sexual abuse while simultaneously having high caseloads with minimal supervision or guidance from leadership. Regarding preparation for employment and on-the-job training, the findings of this study were consistent with the literature, as a MSW research participant in Glassburn's (2020) received no orientation, and another reported receiving a high caseload after only one week of learning paperwork and shadowing.

Additionally, a participant in this study noted difficulties translating theory into practice, adversely impacting his work as a new social worker in a public child welfare agency. While E.-Y. Kim and Yeo's (2019) study focused specifically on new nurse graduates, the findings of this study extend knowledge in the discipline, as it indicated that, like novice nurses, new child welfare workers also experienced transition shock associated with workload, a conflict between theory and practice, uncertainty with the professional values, and difficulties with co-workers. Not only did E.-Y. Kim and Yeo's study identify the shock nurses encountered when transitioning from the academic setting

to their first year of practice, but novice MSW graduates in Glassburn's (2020) study also reported feeling shocked as they transitioned from the academic setting to the professional workforce. Like the findings in this study, the social workers in Glassburn's (2020) study reported concerns or frustrations as the workers initially thought that they were going to be able to provide critical care to vulnerable and marginalized children in need; however, they were faced with the harsh reality that the agencies focused more on productivity and managing multiple cases than on the care of the individual client. The congruence between this study and the findings in E.-Y. Kim and Yeo's (2019) study and Glassburn's (2020) study offers insight into how the new workers analyzed available resources to manage stressors associated with working at a public child welfare agency during their first year of employment.

RQ3 addressed coping skills social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 use to overcome environmental stressors, such as changing the situation (problem-focused) or one's relationship to the situation (emotion-focused). Additionally, in the third research question, I explored what additional coping skills workers desire to use in the future to aid in managing stress. A key finding in this research study was that participants commonly used problem-focused and emotion-focused coping skills to relieve the stress associated with a new MSW graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency, such as engaging in physical exercise and seeking emotional support. In this study, emotion-focused coping is defined as the cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as "avoidance,

minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150).

All 15 participants in this research study provided examples of emotion-focused coping skills used to manage intense job-related stress associated with being a new graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare setting. However, more than half of the participants in this study (53%) reported using avoidance and distancing to aid in relieving stressors associated with being a new graduate working in their first year at a public child welfare agency. Although avoidance and distancing oneself from a stressor can be perceived as a maladaptive coping skill, consistent in this research study, findings in numerous studies indicated that individuals working with abused and neglected children frequently use avoidance to cope with work-related stressors. For instance, law enforcement officers who work in a child advocacy center (Beer et al., 2023), child welfare workers (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021), and individuals in the helping profession (Howard & Navega, 2018) frequently reported using avoidance as a coping mechanism to manage work-related stress. Although it was rare in this study, it is worth noting that a participant in this study identified consuming large quantities of alcohol to manage work-related stress, which was similar to a participant in Beer et al. (2023) study of law enforcement officers who work with abused and neglected children and Griffiths et al. (2018) study on child welfare workers. While this study did not focus on the potentially harmful health and career implications of substance use to manage stress, it is worth future researchers exploring the adverse implications of using substances to cope

with work-related stress could have on an individual's personal and professional lives, especially new social work graduates working in a public child welfare setting.

In addition to using avoidance to manage work-related stress, the findings of this study indicated that seeking emotional support from family, friends, and professionals was a vital emotion-focused coping skill participants used to manage work-related stress. Consistent with the findings in various studies, family, friends, and professional support has been essential in debriefing or processing a challenging workday in individuals who work with abused and neglected children. For instance, some law enforcement officers who worked with maltreated children in Beer et al.'s (2023) study reported that engaging and communicating with family members and friends was beneficial to aid in workplace stress. Furthermore, congruent with the findings of this research study, emergency room staff in Howard and Navega's (2018) study identified talking with a partner, talking to peers, or sharing ideas with peers as helpful to alleviate the demands of workplace stress. Furthermore, the findings of this study expand knowledge in the discipline, as new child welfare workers also identified the value of speaking with a therapist or professional counselor as an emotion-focused coping strategies to aid in alleviating work-related stress. While some individuals in Beer et al.'s (2023) study discussed the value of talking to friends and family as a way of coping with stress, other law enforcement officers stated that they did not feel comfortable with talking to friends and family due to the topic of abuse and neglect children and confidential nature of their work. With the knowledge learned from this study, like child welfare workers, law enforcement officers may

perhaps find it beneficial to speak with a professional as an emotion-focused coping strategy to alleviate job-related stress.

While some participants in this study sought emotional support from friends, family, and professionals, more than half of the research participants identified engaging in physical activities to alleviate stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), engaging in physical activity is an emotion-focused coping skill individuals use to manage stress. The benefits of utilizing physical activities to manage work-related stress in multiple professions for individuals who regularly work with abused and neglected children have been well-cited throughout the literature. For instance, child welfare workers, social workers in child advocacy centers, and law enforcement officers who work in child advocacy centers have reported that participants use physical activities, such as going to the gym, doing yoga, and walking, to alleviate work-related stress (Beer et al., 2023; Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021).

In addition to using emotion-focused coping strategies to relieve job-related stress, more than half of the participants in this study identified using problem-focused coping strategies to lessen work-related stress. In this research study, problem-focused coping is defined as coping strategies that are like methods used for problem-solving, where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weight the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and makes a choice on whom to address the issue (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152). Consulting with colleagues, effective time management, taking up new hobbies, and finding alternative channels for gratification were common problem-focused coping

strategies participants in this study used to alleviate work-related stress. Congruent with this study's findings, the findings in Lamothe et al. (2018) study indicated that the emotional support participants received from colleagues and peers was one of the most common strategies workers use to manage stressors of working in violent or harsh work conditions. Like participants in this study, a recent MSW graduate in Glassburn's (2020) study indicated that they had to minimize their ego and humble themselves to ask other colleagues questions and receive needed support.

Upon implementing the emotion-focused and problem-focused coping skills mentioned above, most research participants noted improvements in their psychological and physical health. When reflecting on their experience as a new MSW graduate working in a public child welfare setting, participants in this study identified several emotion-focused and problem-focused coping skills they desired to use in the future to manage stress. Although participants in this study found value in talking with friends and family about their stressful workday, in the future, many noted an intense desire to seek professional help or therapeutic interventions from a mental health provider. Though there is a great deal of research and articles on the adverse health-related outcomes child welfare workers experience, surprisingly, through an in-depth literature review, scholars rarely discuss child welfare workers seeking professional counseling as an emotion-focus coping strategy to alleviate work-related stress. Therefore, this study may benefit the literature and future researchers as it highlights the need to explore internal or external barriers to child welfare workers receiving professional counseling as an emotion-focused coping strategy to alleviate work-related stress.

Additionally, half of the participants in this study noted a desire to use problem-focused coping strategies in the future to lessen work-related stress, such as expanding their knowledge working with a diverse client population or enhancing their knowledge of practical problem-solving skills. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are at the cornerstone of the social work profession, and there are countless educational opportunities (NASW, 2023); however, as indicated in this study's findings, new MSW graduates continue to report a desire to enhance their cultural competency skills when working with individuals who may look or think differently than the worker. The findings of this study have the potential to expand the literature, as scholars frequently discuss current strategies new child welfare workers use to manage job-related stressors; however, researchers rarely focus on coping skills the child welfare worker desires to use in the future to lessen work-related stress.

TMSC

The TMSC framework was instrumental in answering the study's research questions, as it viewed stress as a transaction or interaction between the person (the new MSW graduate) and their environment (first year employment at a public child welfare agency) (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Kivak, 2020). As noted, in this study, work-related and child-related were the two primary stressors experienced by the participants. Viewing the study from the TMSC framework offered the opportunity to gain insight into how new MSW graduates working in their first year at a public child welfare agency initially appraise or interpret the stressor. Initially, participants in this study identified the primary appraisal phase as troublesome, challenging, and stress-

producing. Using the TMSC framework provided me insight into what, if anything, could have been at stake if the environmental stressor had not changed for the participants.

In utilizing the TMSC framework to guide the research study, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem-focused and emotional-focused coping skills participants use to alleviate or lessen the environmental stressors associated with being a new graduate working in one's first year at a public child welfare agency, which in this study was distancing/avoidance, seeking emotional support from family, friends, and professionals, and engaging in physical activities. The use of the TMSC framework was instrumental in this study, as it provided insight into how participants reappraised the environmental stressor after implementing the identified coping skills; in this study, participants perceived the stressful situation as beneficial or a good experience once the individual applied the identified coping skills to manage or relieve stress during their first year in a child welfare setting. In the reappraisal phase of the TMSC theoretical framework, I gained insight into future coping skills the participants (new MSW graduates) desired to manage environmental stressors associated with working during their first year in the child welfare setting.

The TMSC has been successfully used in various research studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the transactional relationship between the worker and their environment (person-in-environment) in professionals who work with abused and neglected children, such as social workers (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Zychlinski et al., 2021), child welfare workers in child advocacy center settings (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021), law enforcement officers (Beer et al., 2023), first responders (Dautovich

et al., 2022), and helping professionals (Howard & Navega, 2018). Furthermore, in several studies, the TMSC framework has been instrumental in understanding the workers' cognitive process or perception of the stressors (appraisals), the worker's health consequences associated with work-related stress (emotional, physical, and psychological), and coping skills (problem-focused and emotional-focused) the worker used to alleviate or mitigate work-related stress when working with abused and neglected children (Beer et al., 2023; Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Howard & Navega, 2018). While the TMSC framework has been used in various studies to explore the phenomenon of work-related stress, health consequences of stress, and coping skills used to lessen stress, there are limited to no published studies on the use of the TMSC exploring the experiences of work-related stress or new MSW graduates transitioning from the academic setting to their first year working in a public child welfare setting; therefore, this study may aid in addressing the gap in the current literature and extend knowledge in the discipline.

Limitations

The research study had some limitations. First, I used purposeful sampling to collect data for this study; therefore, the total sample size (N=15) does not represent the population. As participants were from three states, with 73% residing in one state, it limited the applicability of the study's findings to other settings, such as in other states and counties (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021). While I did not target African Americans or Blacks to participate in the study, every research participant identified themselves as Black or African American; therefore, due to the homogeneity of the research

participants, there is a limitation to the study's transferability. Additionally, a limitation of this study was the research design. As a qualitative inquiry was used to collect data for this study, the study's results are not generalizable. However, the study is still essential because it helps provide an opportunity to use TMSC to explore the perception of work-related stress and coping skills used by new MSW social work graduates as they transition from the academic setting to their first year working in a public child welfare setting. To achieve transferability and dependability in this study, I provided a detailed description of recruitment methods, research participants, and how data were analyzed, which will aid in allowing future researchers to replicate the study in a similar setting, under similar conditions, and with similar research participants (Billups, 2019). Despite this study's limitations, it was beneficial as it began to close the literature gap and provided insight into a topic where little information was known.

Recommendations

The TMSC has been used in the literature to explore work-related stress, understand how one appraises the occupational stressors, health consequences of the stressors, and coping skills one uses to mitigate work-related stress; however, limited to no published studies have used the model to explore the experiences of social workers who graduated with a MSW degree within the past twelve months and have worked at a public child welfare agency for twelve months or less after graduation. As the homogeneity of participant characteristics did not demographically represent the social work profession overall, a recommendation for future researchers would be to use the TMSC framework to explore work-related stress, health implications, and coping skills

with individuals from different groups, such as individuals in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+), Hispanics, Asians, or Caucasian communities. Additionally, child welfare workers who work in urban settings and those who work in rural settings may encounter different job-related stressors due to limited external resources in the area for children and families; therefore, it is recommended that a future scholar use TMSC to explore work-related stress, health factors, and coping skills within different geographical locations.

Furthermore, in this study, I did not inquire about the type of academic setting the participants attended to obtain their MSW degree (online or in-person); therefore, it is recommended that future scholars use the TMSC framework to explore work-related stress, health-related outcomes, and coping skills on new social workers who attended in person and/or online settings, as their perception of work-related stress and being prepared for the field may differ based on the location the individual received their graduate degree. As this study focused on MSW graduates, it is recommended that future researchers consider using the TMSC framework to explore the experience of work-related stressors, health outcomes, and coping skills for new social workers with BSW degree encountered as the individual transitions from the academic setting to their first year working at a public child welfare agency.

Implications

Various researchers have explored job-related stress and the adverse impact of job-related stress on one's physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health with individuals working in a child welfare setting (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021;

Griffiths et al., 2018, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018). However, Beer, Phillips, and Quinn, (2021) asserted that in the literature, there is a significant focus on quantifying work-related stress and health-related outcomes instead of gaining an in-depth understanding of the cognitive and emotional factors a person used to appraise work-related stress, coping skills employed to lessen work-related stress and subsequent health consequences associated with work-related stress. The results of this qualitative research study may be beneficial in promoting positive social change on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, as the study results provided an in-depth understanding of the environmental factors that contribute to work-related stress for new MSW graduates working in their first year at a public child welfare agency, explored how the new worker appraised the environmental stressor, identified health consequences associated with the environmental stressors, and explored coping skills the new worker put in place to lessen the stress associated with job-related stressors.

Self-reflection is a fundamental need for social workers, as self-reflection provides the worker with an opportunity to increase awareness of their social identities, promote empathy and humility, de-stress to prevent physical and psychological implications of stress and improve social work practice (Taiwo, 2022). Upon reading the findings of this study, social workers working in a child welfare setting could take a moment to reflect and identify environmental stressors they encountered at work and evaluate how they cognitively appraise the stressor. Suppose the social worker appraised the situation as dangerous, challenging, or stress-producing, as the participants in this study had done. In that case, the worker may perhaps use information or knowledge

presented in the study's findings to evaluate how the environmental stressor has impacted their physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health, and if so, to what degree. Upon reading the study's literature review section and findings, the worker could take a moment to reflect on coping skills one uses to manage stress and determine if the coping skill is healthy, such as seeking emotional support from family members, friends, or colleagues, or possibly detrimental such as consuming large quantities of alcohol. After reading this research study, workers may identify alternative coping skills that have worked for their fellow child welfare workers to alleviate work-related stress, thus potentially helping the social worker add new coping skills to their toolbox.

As the TSMC has been shown throughout the literature to effectively identify environmental stressors, coping mechanisms, and health outcomes in individuals in the helping profession, it would be beneficial for a worker to consider using TSMC when reflecting on one's job-related stressors. The findings of this research study emphasized the importance of self-reflection, as when participants first encountered the environmental stressor, they identified the stress as troublesome, challenging, or stress-producing; however, after reflecting on their experiences, the participants implemented several problem-focused and emotional-focused coping skills to alleviate the work-related stress, and after implementing the coping skills participant shared that the environmental stressor which was once deemed challenging was now beneficial.

While most social workers tend to reflect alone, it may benefit future social workers to consider reflecting with colleagues, supervisors, and clients (Taiwo, 2022). Formal and informal reflection with colleagues in a group setting or a casual one-on-one

interaction can allow participants to develop solutions on what can be done to improve interactions with clients, discuss environmental challenges, and discuss power and privilege when interacting with families and clients (Taiwo, 2022). Furthermore, future social workers should consider reflecting with supervisors to help the new graduates reflect on their ethics, biases, skills, and practice dilemmas (Taiwo, 2022). Additionally, reflecting with clients on services received may be beneficial for future social workers as it could provide an opportunity to hear from the client's point of view on areas of strengths related to the service the client received or possible areas that the social worker or perhaps the agency could improve to enhance the client's experience when receiving services at the public child welfare agency (Taiwo, 2022).

The study's findings indicate the importance of community support from family, friends, peers, and supervisors in providing emotional support to colleagues who work in child welfare settings, which is consistent with the literature (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Lamothe et al., 2018; McFadden, 2020) that may promote positive social change on the mezzo level. The new master-level social worker working during their first year at a public child welfare agency will encounter various environmental stressors, which have the potential to adversely impact the individual emotional, behavioral, and physical health (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2018, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018). Although the social worker may use self-reflection to appraise and reflect on one's experience of environmental stressors and the potential health outcomes associated with stress, there are times that the new social worker may not notice their behavior changes themselves, which may be observed

or noticed by others (Oliver & Duncan, 2019). For instance, a participant in this research study noticed that he had been “drinking” and isolating himself to alleviate stress, which may be something that he did not anticipate was a problem or an unhealthy way of coping with stress.

Upon reviewing the findings in this study, in the future, a family member or friend could gently approach the behavior changes that they see in the new child welfare worker and offer to provide them with an alternative method to alleviate stress, such as venting or talking to someone the person trusts. Furthermore, the findings in this study could inform family members and friends of different environmental stressors new social workers encounter when performing their child welfare job, such as child-related (hearing severe case of child maltreatment) or work-related (heavy caseloads and difficulties completing an assigned task in the designed time frame).

As child welfare workers are regularly presented with high workloads (Babu et al., 2020), exposed to graphic narratives of crimes against children (Brady, 2017), and hostile work conditions (Lamothe et al., 2018; Schiff et al., 2018), receiving adequate supervision is critical to help the new graduate successfully transition from the academic setting to working in the professional workforce (Baugerud et al., 2018; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018). Therefore, supervisors may use the findings in this study to understand further environmental stressors that new workers experience and coping mechanisms the workers use that they may be ashamed or embarrassed to self-disclose, such as their self-doubt in working with complex cases or fear with asking for help with a task due to concerns of being judged by leadership.

While the supervisor or leadership at the agency may not be able to remove the environmental stressor altogether, participants in this study shared that having training from someone familiar with the job, having a peer consultation group, education about signs of mental health would be beneficial in mitigating work-related stress. It is recommended that leadership and supervisors conduct regular check-ins with the new child welfare workers, offer unit training on recognizing mental illness, and have a list of internal resources such as employee health or external resources the worker may use to address emotional or behavioral health challenges. Perhaps the agency may consider implementing mindfulness training for social workers, as there is evidence in the literature that applying mindfulness training through the theoretical lens of the TMSC is practicable and may be beneficial in addressing stress, coping efforts, and subsequent health implications (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021, p. 243).

The findings in this study could be used to promote positive social change on the macro level as it moves away from simply quantifying work-related stress to providing a personal account of the process in which the worker cognitively and emotionally appraised the occupational stressors, the coping mechanism used to mitigate job-related stressors, and the subsequent health implications of the work-related stress (Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021). The study's findings could be used on a macro level to develop interventions and prevention strategies to address work-related stressors, which have the potential to adversely impact the workers' physical, emotional, and behavioral health. As a heavy caseload has been a primary concern for participants in this study and throughout the literature, policymakers could conduct a workload and caseload assessment to ensure

an equitable and realistic distribution of cases and adequate staffing levels to ensure that child welfare workers could complete tasks during a regular workday (Casey Family Programs, 2017). The study findings indicated that social workers new to the field of child welfare felt ill-prepared for job-related tasks and experienced several adverse health consequences associated with job-related stress. Considering the study's findings, policymakers could promote positive social change on a macro level by developing realistic job preview videos that accurately reflect child welfare workers' jobs, roles, and responsibilities (Casey Family Programs, 2017).

Furthermore, policymakers or advocates could implement incentives or bonuses to compensate for the workers' unpredictable work schedules or individuals who must perform job-related tasks in geographically challenging areas or communities (Casey Family Programs, 2017). The findings of this study revealed that hearing about child maltreatment adversely impacts the workers' health; however, an individual in this study who had been predisposed to an adverse childhood experience identified hearing the account of child maltreatment as retraumatizing. Perhaps policymakers and advocates could implement behavioral or competency-based screening to ensure child welfare workers can perform job-related tasks without exacerbating their pre-existing health conditions (Casey Family Programs, 2017).

Conclusion

Transitioning from the academic setting to the first year of practice may present many challenges for new graduates (Wong et al., 2018). High levels of stress have the potential to adversely impact the workers physically (migraines, high blood pressure,

compromised immune system making one more acceptable to diseases), psychologically (depression, anxiety, vicarious trauma), and neurologically (impairment in memory), which have the potential to lead to long term health consequences for the worker (Beer, Phillips, Letson & Wolf, 2021; Beer, Phillips, & Quinn, 2021; Casey Family Programs, 2017; Saddiq & Iqbal, 2019; Yaribeygi et al., 2017). While a plethora of scholars have explored the challenges that new nurses and teachers encounter when transitioning from the academic setting to their first year of practice (Fitchett et al., 2018; García-Martín et al., 2021; J. H. Kim & Shin, 2020; Wong et al., 2018), researchers have expressed concern with the limited data on social workers transitioning from the academic setting to the workforce (Choi et al., 2021; Glassburn, 2020; Grant et al., 2017; Tham & Lynch, 2021).

Undoubtedly, master-level social workers who are transitioning from the academic setting to their first year of employment at a child welfare agency will likely experience unique challenges as the new graduate will have to make life-altering decisions about the health and safety of vulnerable children while simultaneously entering an environment where they are learning the organizational structure, establishing alliances with peers, and the jobs roles (Frögéli et al., 2019). Stress associated with the new environmental stressors can adversely impact the new workers' emotional, behavioral, and physical health, leading to detrimental consequences. This study adds to existing knowledge and may be used to better inform understanding about the role of work-related stress and implications for the TMSC framework on social workers who graduated with a MSW degree between June 2022 and May 2023 as they transition from

the academic setting to their first year at a public child welfare agency. Additionally, this study enhanced the professional body of knowledge by offering critical insight into how the worker cognitively appraised environmental stressors. Furthermore, the study's findings increased the knowledge in the discipline as it identified the adverse health consequences associated with job-related stress and explored coping skills workers used to alleviate it. Scholars assert that stress is one of the leading reasons child welfare workers exit the field (Casey Family Programs, 2017); therefore, this study was beneficial in shedding light on the unique experiences of new social work graduates, which have the potential to promote positive social change on a micro, mezzo, and macro level.

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Appendix A: Screening Checklist

- a. Do you have a Master's in Social Work Degree from a program accredited by the Council of Social Work Education?
- b. Did you graduate with your MSW degree within the past twelve months?
- c. Are you currently employed at a public child welfare agency in the United States and provide service to children and families impacted by child abuse or neglect?
- d. Have you worked at the public child welfare agency for less than twelve months?

Meeting Inclusion Criteria to Participate in this Study. If the answers to questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 are yes, please reply to this email with the words **“Met inclusion criteria.”**

Appendix B: Demographics Questions

- a. What gender do you identify as?
- b. What race/ethnicity do you identify as?
- c. What is your age?
- d. What state do you work in?
- e. How many months have you worked at a child protective service?

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How has your stress level changed since graduating and beginning to work in a public child welfare setting?
2. Please tell me about a stressful situation you encountered during your first year at a public child welfare agency.
3. How would you describe the situation? For example, did you find the situation troublesome or beneficial, whether now or in the future? In what ways? (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31)
4. What, if anything, could have been done about the situation? (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31)
5. What, if anything, could have been at stake if the situation did not change? (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35)
6. How did stressful events impact your physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health? (Kapoor & Chhabra, 2022).
7. What strategies did you use to resolve the problem you encountered at work? (Problem-focused; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 153)
8. What, if any, strategies did you use to lessen emotional distress in the work environment? (avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from adverse events; Emotion-focused; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150).
9. What behavioral strategies do you use to manage stressors in the work environment (engaging in physical exercise to get one's mind off a problem,

meditating, having a drink, venting anger, or seeking emotional support;

Emotional-focused; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 151).

10. How did your perception of the stressful situation change once you applied the mentioned coping skills to alleviate stressors working in a public child welfare setting?
11. What, if any, coping skills would you use in the future to alleviate the stress associated with being a new social work graduate working in a public child welfare setting?
12. As you reflect on your experience as a new MSW graduate working in your first year at a public child welfare agency, what resources, skills, or knowledge do you wish you had to alleviate work-related stress?

Appendix D: Apriori Codes with Description

Table 2*Apriori Codes with Description*

Apriori Code	Description
Interprets the stressors as positive	The benign-positive appraisal occurs when the person's interactions with the environment are pleasing and protect or promise to safeguard the individual's well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
Interprets the stressors as dangerous	Stress appraisal arises when the person's interaction with the environment leads to loss/harm, threat, and challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Threats are appraised as a worry or concern for a loss or potential damage that has yet to occur, which will have negative implications in the future (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
Interprets the stressors as irrelevant	An individual's encounter with the environment does not affect their well-being; Nothing was gained or lost in the transaction, and the person is not invested in a possible outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)
Physical impacts of stress	Physical stress response incorporates many critical areas of the body, from the organ system to the regulatory process, including energy supply, cardiovascular functioning, glucose metabolism, blood clotting, respiratory system, immune system, and water balance (APA, 2021; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Ranjbaran et al., 2013; Sutton et al., 2008; Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Examples: weight gain, weight loss, fatigue/exhaustion, high blood pressure, headaches, developing blood clots in one's leg, breaking out in hives and sores, nervous ticks, loss of large patches of hair, and mouth ulcers.
Emotional and behavioral impacts of stress	The emotional impact of stress can affect individuals in various ways. Examples: adverse change in their behaviors, quickly angry or snappy, unexpected fluctuation in their mood, screaming or yelling at a loved one, increased alcohol consumption, sleep disturbance, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, procrastinating, or neglecting responsibilities, avoiding social situations, panic attacks, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, sleep disturbance, burnout (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021; Sutton et al., 2008; Tang & Li, 2021)
Neurological impacts of stress	Stress affects the individual's brain functioning and the nervous system. Examples: difficulties recalling important events, gaps in memory, losing objectivity, detached from clients, workers' fear of violence to dictate their work priorities, taking on new cases with a rigid or predetermined notion, changes in perception when working with traumatized children, cognitive distortion (Lamothe et al., 2018; Letson et al., 2020; Sutton et al., 2008; Yaribeygi et al., 2017)).
Child and Family- Related Stress	Child-related stressors are defined as child welfare workers making the decision to remove a child from their home, seeing children who had been severely abused, recommending that the court system terminate a parent's parental rights, observing children's harsh living conditions, and experiencing a child's death on one's caseload or a colleague caseload, repeatedly exposed to hearing a client's trauma or working with parents or family members with mental health illnesses, such as substance abuse,

Apriori Code	Description
Visit-Related stressors	schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019, p. 199; Rienks, 2020). Stress child welfare encountering when conducting home visits related to conducting home visits. Examples: visiting high-crime areas, making rural home visits, being threatened with harm by a client, making home visits in bad weather, visiting violent clients, and being physically harmed by clients, such as being punched, bitten, kicked, and thrown objects at them (Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Lamothe et al., 2018).
Workload stressors	A child welfare worker feeling overworked, high caseloads, unsupportive colleagues, unsupported supervisors, and conflict (Burns et al., 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020).
Orientation/ Preparation	New social work graduating perception of feeling prepared for employment and on-the-job training. Examples: no orientation, poorly trained or prepared, good orientation, very good” orientation (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Hunt et al., 2016; Wilke et al., 2020).
Supervision	Leadership or guidance provided by a new social worker to aid them with the successful transition from being a student to a professional, as it ensures that the social worker is equipped with the essential skills to provide competent, appropriate, and ethical social work services and care to the client (NASW, 2013). Example: strong and supportive supervisor, very good experience, poor supervisory support, and satisfactory experience (Burns et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2017).
Social worker's expectations	A new graduate’s “social, physical, and emotional response” to the “unexpected, unwanted, or undesired” demands associated with being a novice professional responding to the new workplace demands and responsibilities (Kramer, 1974, p. 3). For example, realities associated with organizational bureaucracy, policies, and budget cuts prevented the novice practitioner from delivering critical services to families in need (Tham & Lynch, 2019), focusing on billing and productivity compared to patient care (Glassburn, 2020), unexpected conflict with peers and supervision, difficulties adjusting to the new work environment.
Emotional focused coping (Current)	The cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as “avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150).
Emotional focused coping (Desired to use in the future)	The cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as "avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150), focuses explicitly on coping skill the new child welfare worker desired to use in the future.
Problem-focused coping (Current)	A method used for problem-solving is where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weighs the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and chooses whom to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152).

Apriori Code	Description
Problem-focused coping (Desired to use in the future)	A method used for problem-solving, where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weight the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and makes a choice on whom to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152), focuses explicitly on coping skill the new child welfare worker desired to use in the future.

Appendix E: Themes and Corresponding Definitions

Table 3*Themes and Corresponding Definitions*

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
Environmental Stressors		An event or situation in which an individual has assessed the situation to be threatening, frightening, or detrimental within the limitations of the environment (Kivak, 2020).
	Workload Stressor	A child welfare worker feeling overworked, high caseloads, unsupportive colleagues, unsupported supervisors, and conflict (Burns et al., 2023; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2020).
	Child-Related Stressors	Child-related stressors are defined as child welfare workers making the decision to remove a child from their home, seeing children who had been severely abused, recommending that the court system terminate a parent's parental rights, observing children's harsh living conditions, and experiencing a child's death on one's caseload or a colleague caseload, repeatedly exposed to hearing a client's trauma or working with parents or family members with mental health illnesses, such as substance abuse, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression (Benton & Iglesias, 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019, p. 199; Rienks, 2020).
Experiences of Stress		A person initially appraising the environmental stressors (workload and child-related) to be threatening (a person anticipates that the environmental stressors will lead to injury, illness, damage to self-esteem, or the loss of a loved or valued person) in which the person uses negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and anger to categorize the event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
Harmful Health-Related Outcomes		An impairment in a person's physical, emotional, behavioral, and psychological health contributes to a decline in the person's social, occupational, or other areas of functioning (APA, 2013).
	Physiological Effect	The way a person's body physically responds to stress, such as weight gain, weight loss, fatigue/ exhaustion, high blood pressure, headaches, developing blood clots in one's leg, breaking out in hives and sores, nervous ticks, loss of large patches of hair, and mouth ulcers (APA, 2021; Burns et al., 2023; Glassburn, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Ranjbaran et al., 2013; Sutton et al., 2008; Yaribeygi et al., 2017)
	Psychological Effects	The harmful or adverse mental or emotional impact of stress, such as adverse changes in behaviors, quickly angry or snappy, unexpected fluctuation in mood, screaming or yelling at a loved one, increased alcohol consumption, sleep disturbance, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, avoiding social situations, panic attacks, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, sleep

Theme	Subtheme	Definition
		disturbance, burnout (Griffiths et al., 2018; King, 2021; Sutton et al., 2008; Tang & Li, 2021).
Reality shock		A construct of reality in which new graduates have a “social, physical, and emotional response” to the “unexpected, unwanted, or undesired” demands associated with novice professionals responding to the new workplace demands and responsibilities (Kramer, 1974, p. 3).
Coping		“Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).
	Emotion-Focused Coping	The cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as “avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150).
	Problem-Focused Coping	A method used for problem-solving is where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weighs the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and chooses whom to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152).
Benign-Positive Reappraisal		A person perceives their interaction with the environment as pleasing after the person initially appraising the environment to be stress-producing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
Future Coping		A person reviewing coping strategies previously used to determine what, if any, coping methods the person would use in the future to alleviate work-related stress
	Future Emotion-Focused Coping	The cognitive process of lessening emotional distress caused by stressors, such as "avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, positive comparison, and wresting positive values from negative events" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150), focuses explicitly on coping skill the new child welfare worker desired to use in the future.
	Future Problem-Focused Coping	A method used for problem-solving, where the individual identifies or defines the problem, generates alternative solutions to the problem, weight the alternatives and solutions to address the presenting problem, and makes a choice on whom to address the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 152), focuses explicitly on coping skill the new child welfare worker desired to use in the future.