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Lived Experiences of Newly Graduated Social Workers Transitioning Into the Field of Child Protective Services

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Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Newly graduated social workers often enter child protective services aspiring to positively influence families, yet many are unprepared for the complexities of field-based child welfare work. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of child protective services. Guided by the person environment fit theory, the study focused on how participants understood and journeyed through their early professional career. Semistructured interviews were performed with seven social workers who entered the field of child protective services within the last 2 years. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The findings displayed five core themes that addressed newly graduated social workers' experiences: mentorship, role transition, supervisory support, systematic pressure, and training gap. Themes highlighted the disconnect between academia and the realities of child and family services. Participants recounted how these challenges influenced their emotional well-being, confidence, and ability to manage heavy cases, while identifying coping mechanisms and support systems that facilitated their professional adjustment. Results may contribute to the conversation on supervisory practices, pedagogical training, and organizational supports for novice workers in high-intensity social work environments. Implications for positive social change include enhanced comprehension of the transitional needs of newly graduated social workers and the development of purposeful interventions to improve retention and career satisfaction in child protective services.

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Dedication

To my daughters: Your joy gave me strength, your love gave me hope, and your belief in me gave me courage. To the children in the world who are not protected, this work is for you. And to every social worker who carries the profound calling of protecting defenseless children, thank you for intervening. May this study honor your dedication and commitment and ignite the change you relentlessly advocate for.

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank God for giving me the perseverance, strength, and focus to embark on this doctoral journey even when life got harder than I thought that I could manage. I want to thank my daughters, Ja'Nya Daijanae Simmons and Bella Elise Simmons, for giving Mommy the time that she needed to focus on her studies, and being understanding during my times of frustrations, late nights, and busy weekends. Mommy loves you. I am incredibly thankful to have been blessed with supportive parents, Theresa and Littrell Fuller. Thank you for always having my back and supporting me throughout this entire journey. I could not have done it without you. Lastly, to my dissertation committee, Dr. Melody Moore and Dr. Jennifer Sherer, thank you for your continuous support, direction, and valuable feedback during this long journey. Your impeccable attention to detail helped strengthen my study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Social workers are lacking the ability to adapt to the dynamics of the work environment in the field of child protective services (CPS) after graduating from college. Voll et al., (2022) found a discrepancy between what social workers learn during their professional education and the expectations they face when they start working in the field. Social workers are often the first point of contact for abused and/or neglected children once a report has been made, and for this reason social workers need to be fully prepared when they meet this vulnerable population. Working in social services is a demanding job in an environment where tensions and stress levels are elevated, and this elevation of stress is heightened when a newly graduated social worker is ill prepared for the field.

In addition to the high demands of working in the field, there is an expectation imposed on newly graduated social workers that they have a proven understanding of the organizational aspects of the field (Tham & Lynch, 2019). Newly graduated social workers' lived experiences also show that there is a disconnect between education and transitioning into the field, including establishing safety plans for families, finishing paperwork in a timely manner, and making split decisions on removing children from the home with little to no guidance (Glassburn, 2020). Due to these factors, it was essential to explore the preparation of newly graduated social workers entering the field to understand their experiences of the transition.

In Chapter 1, I summarize the literature relevant to this study, provide evidence of the problem, clarify why this study was needed, and describe the focal point of this

study. Additionally, I discuss the research question and how it aligned with the theoretical framework. I conclude Chapter 1 by describing concepts related to this study, pointing out the limitations of the study and explaining implications for positive social change.

Background

During the federal fiscal year of 2022, there were 558,899 victims of child abuse and neglect in the 52 U.S. states (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). Seventy-four percent of the victims experienced neglect (environmental, educational, nutritional), 17.0% of the children were victims of physical abuse, 10.6% were victims of child sexual abuse, and 6.8% were victims of psychological abuse, with 1,990 of children dying from abuse and neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

The definition of child abuse and neglect is "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" (Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 2024). Per this definition, a child is defined as a person who is 18 years of age or younger. When an allegation (referral) of any type of child abuse and/or neglect is made, the information is either screened in, which means that CPS will respond, or it is screened out, which means that there was not enough information in the allegation to prove that abuse and/or neglect occurred (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Social workers have been considered the most appropriate individuals capable of working in this field by being the advocates of protection for these children and families

(National Association of Social Workers, 2005). The Title IV-E, which was approved by the Social Security Act of 1980 (Leung et al., 2021), is an educational program created to provide states with federal monetary resources, educational support, and reimbursements that are designed to recruit and strengthen child welfare workers (social workers) with pursuing and completing their bachelor's in social work (BSW) or their master's in social work (MSW). One or both degrees afford the social worker the opportunity to become qualified to work with vulnerable children as a licensed social worker (Leung et al., 2021).

The issue that exists in the field of social work is the disconnect between education and practical skills for newly graduated social workers. Newly graduated social workers are being hired into the field with the education that they learned in school, but are lacking the ability to apply this education due to inadequate preparedness (Fook, 2022). Although education is the basis for graduating and transitioning into the field, education does not supplement experience (Bochicchio et al., 2021). The field of social work comprises multiple stress factors from what is happening in the home. When a social worker who has no idea how to apply their education to this unfamiliar territory is added to the field, this creates further chaos, leading to newly graduated social workers leaving the field soon after entering it (Tham & Lynch, 2019).

Problem Statement

The social problem that prompted research on this topic was the disconnect between education and practical skills for newly graduated social workers. Voll et al., (2021) found a discrepancy between what social workers learn during their professional

education and the expectations they face when they began working in the field. Likewise, Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2022) found that there are significant gaps and tension between academic programs and professional practice, which lead to new graduates feeling low levels of readiness for practice and a lack of field education.

Working in social services is a demanding job, which comes with stress due to the workload and the type of work that is delegated. Pressure increases when a social worker enters the field and they are not equipped with the right education and skill set to complete the delegated tasks. Battaglia and Flynn (2020) stated that newly qualified social workers are entering the field in an environment that is not readily understood by them. Although newly qualified social workers have received education in the field of social work, further examination is needed to understand how to aid these individuals during this transition period. Bochicchio et al. (2021) stated that although there is a growing interest in the experiences of early career social workers in the field of CPS, there is a gap between research and practice.

Purpose of the Study

Transitioning from education to the field of social work in CPS can be stressful. A newly graduated social worker is tasked with several unfamiliar job duties in unfamiliar territory. Being the person who may be responsible for saving the lives of abused and neglected children, while adhering to the policies and procedures of the agency and creating valuable and purposeful connections with colleagues/supervisors, is a duty that even the most educated newly graduated social worker is not prepared for (Frögéli et al., 2019). In the current qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of newly

graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of social work in CPS. By exploring this area, I provided information that may be useful in preparing newly graduated social workers.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of child protective services?

Theoretical Framework

I used the person environment fit theory (P-E-fit theory) as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory explains how stress arises when there is a lack of fit between the individual's skills, resources, and abilities on the one hand and the demands of the work environment on the other hand (Edwards et al., 1998). P-E fit theory highlights the importance of the individual's feelings about the environment and the interaction between them and the environment (Edwards et al., 1998). In the current study, P-E-fit theory was used to explain the lack of fit between resources, which was the college experience (field experience and classroom learning), and the demands of the environment, which was working in the field of social work in CPS after graduation. Goldberg and Warburton (2021) posited that the educational curriculum does not sufficiently prepare students for the field, which may explain the phenomenon addressed in the current study.

Nature of the Study

To answer the research question in this qualitative study, I used a qualitative phenomenological design. Giorgi (2009) stated that phenomenological research seeks to

explain the nature of things by exploring how people experience them. The phenomenon that was studied in this research was the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers. The phenomenological design was applied in this study because I sought to explore the beliefs and feelings of the participants related to the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 2009). The population that was studied in this research was newly graduated social workers. Furthermore, by applying a phenomenological design in this study, I was able to form a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Obtaining a greater understanding of their lived experiences helped me provide an understanding of the resources newly graduated social workers needed to help them meet the demands of working in CPS.

Definitions

Child Protective Services (CPS): An agency that is authorized by the state to receive and respond to any allegation of child abuse and/or child neglect that requires an investigation to occur to determine whether the allegations meet the criteria for opening a case on child abuse and/or neglect (Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Newly graduated social worker: An individual who has graduated with a BSW or MSW within the last 2 years, and is currently working in the field of social work with minimal professional experience.

Social worker: A mental health professional who aids individuals, families, and organizations in improving the lives of vulnerable individuals (DosDiaz, 2009).

Assumptions

Newly graduated social workers face several challenges once they transition from school to the field. These challenges include environmental stress, a lack of resources or guidance, the family dynamics of those involved in CPS, and high workloads with limited time for completion of paperwork. Wong et al. (2018) stated that in addition to these factors, there is a lack of confidence with newly graduated social workers. Babu et al. (2020) pointed out that newly graduated social workers also face a lack of or extremely limited support from their coworkers. For these reasons, newly graduated social workers who have transitioned from education to the field may not be prepared for their position. In the current study, I assumed that the seven participants would answer questions truthfully during their interviews and would articulate their level of preparedness or lack thereof.

Scope and Delimitations

I explored the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers transitioning from education to the field of CPS who graduated within the last 2 years. Although considering focus groups as an initial data collection method, I decided to use one-on-one interviews so participants could openly speak about their experiences. Creswell and Baez (2020) stated that one-on-one interviews allow participants to be open and honest about their experiences without thinking about how their peers will view them.

In the current study, participants who graduated and transitioned into the field more than 2 years ago were not selected to take part in the study. In addition, I selected participants who entered the field of CPS immediately after graduation and before

working in any other field in social services. I sought to ensure that participants' employment experiences were not from any other field.

In this study, every participant had a BSW or MSW. Although there are individuals working in the field who do not possess either degree, for the purposes of this study a degree in the field was required. Establishing transferability occurred through providing descriptive details about participant interviews, explaining how the data were collected and evaluated throughout the interviews (see Creswell & Baez, 2020), and thoroughly describing the connections or disconnections between education and experience.

Limitations

The first limitation was that the pool of social workers willing to participate in the interviews might be biased toward those who understood the importance of research. Limiting the study to social workers in the field of CPS was not representative of all social workers. Another limitation that arose from the study was the research design. I used a qualitative phenomenological design, which is effective when a researcher is seeking to explain a phenomenon related to the what, where, when, and who of the study topic (Kim et al., 2017). Additionally, the findings of the current study are not generalizable due to each participant having different perceptions of how outcomes affected them (see Creswell & Baez, 2020). Although the study had these limitations, the results outweighed the limitations by providing suggestions for ways to better prepare social workers for the field after graduation. The results of this study may be valuable to the individuals currently working in the field and those looking to enter the field.

Significance

The themes of this study offered insight into how to better prepare newly graduated social workers to work in the field of CPS. The field of CPS is stressful due to the environmental demands of entering homes and institutions and working with traumatized victims and their abusers. A social worker cannot effectively complete their job in these environments if they are not equipped with the correct education and practical skills. Improvement of educational and practical skills for newly graduated social workers could create safer environments for children, families, and organizations connected to the field of social work in CPS.

Furthermore, the findings may be used to recommend resources needed to improve the transition of newly graduated social workers to work in the field of CPS. Additionally, findings may be used to inform educators on specific needs of social workers before graduation or specific training in the field before newly graduated social workers receive their initial caseloads. Adding additional training, skills, and knowledge may produce a positive social change in the field of social work by preparing newly graduated social workers for the transition into the field, which will result in positive lived experiences for newly graduated social workers. The findings from the study may be used in diverse ways to promote positive social change. By exploring the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers who had graduated in the last 2 years, I sought to enhance the knowledge of family members and those closely associated with the social worker on how to positively support them.

Summary

Newly graduated social workers are entering a field that they are not physically, emotionally, or mentally prepared for. There is a disconnect between the education that the newly graduated social workers receive and the practical skills needed on the job. Newly graduated social workers are tasked with making decisions that affect the welfare of vulnerable children and their families and are doing so in the most strenuous environments. In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers during their first 2 years in CPS.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the research problem related to the study and addressed the perceived gap in the literature. Furthermore, I explained the purpose of the study with information specific to the research question and theoretical framework. I also described the limitations of the study and explained how the findings of this study may positively impact the field of social work. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth literature review that includes the theoretical framework and concepts/topics related to newly graduated social workers in the field of CPS.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Child abuse and neglect impacts thousands of children yearly. To mitigate this problem, social workers are entrusted with the task of ensuring that children are safe and healthy and live in abuse-free environments. Due to the number of reports of abuse and neglect made each year, social workers are faced with high workloads, hostile work environments, and work-related stress (Tang & Li, 2021). Furthermore, newly graduated social workers encounter additional work-related stressors due to a lack of preparedness when entering the workforce (Glassburn, 2020). Newly graduated social workers who are placed in these types of circumstances (high workloads, hostile work environments, stressful situations) often sustain physical, emotional, and mental deterioration, which leads to a high turnover rate in the field (Saddiq & Iqbal, 2019).

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I used the P-E-fit theory as the foundational underpinning the study. I explored the insufficient field training that newly graduated social workers receive prior to entering CPS, and how this has created a disconnect between education and practical skills. I explored the factors that could contribute to a better connection between education and practical skills of newly graduated social workers.

The social problem that prompted research on this topic was the disconnect between education and practical skills for newly graduated social workers. In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of social work in CPS. By exploring this area, I provided

information that may be useful in preparing newly graduated social workers for this transition.

Child abuse and neglect is a grave concern in the United States and has an impact on thousands of children yearly (National Children's Alliance, 2025). Historically, social workers have been considered to be the most suitable individuals to address these concerns; however, when social workers are placed in the field without proper training, resources, or the ability to manage and maintain their job as a social worker, they often struggle. Social workers are entrusted with the task of ensuring that children are safe, healthy, and live in abuse-free environments (Lwin et. al., 2024).

Due to the number of reports of abuse and neglect made each year, newly graduated social workers are faced with high workloads, hostile work environments, low pay, and a lack of support from their work environment and the community (Jansen, 2018). Furthermore, newly graduated social workers encounter additional work-related stressors due to a lack of preparedness when entering the workforce (Glassburn, 2020). Newly graduated social workers who are placed in these types of environments often sustain physical, emotional, and mental deterioration, which leads to a high turnover rate (Saddiq & Iqbal, 2019).

In this Chapter, I review the extant literature regarding the concerns of newly graduated social workers. P-E-fit Theory was applied to this study because it assisted in acquiring a greater understanding of the high demands that newly graduated social workers face within the first 2 years of transitioning to the work field of child protective services. It is important to understand the mindset and experiences of newly graduated

social workers to potentially create awareness for increased field training prior to newly graduated social workers entering the work field of child protective services. I discuss the literature search strategy, analyze the theoretical foundation, and provide a detailed description of key variables and concepts related to this study.

Literature Search Strategy

The electronic databases that were used to obtain data for this study were: SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, ProQuest Ebook Central, EBSCOHost, Walden Library, Social Workers Abstract, APA Psychology, Academic Search Complete, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Public Health Database, and National Data APA Psychology. The search terms that were used were: *Social Services, Stress, Stress Factors, Work Overload, Case Managers, Child Protective Services, Workplace Overload, Social Worker Education, Case Manager Overload, Occupational Stress, Work Support, Education, Educational Psychology, Learning Tools for Social Workers, Cognitive Development for Social Workers, Teaching in Social Services, Newly Graduated Social Workers, Gap in Education, Working in Social Services, and New Social Workers.*

Theoretical Foundation

Person Environment Fit Theory

The person environment fit theory (P-E-fit theory) guided this study. P-E-fit theory suggests that stress arises when there is a lack of fit between the individual's skills, resources, and abilities on one hand, and the demands of the work environment on the other hand (Edwards et al., 1998). P-E-fit theory highlights the importance of the individual's perception of the environment and the interaction between them (Edwards et

al., 1998). I used the P-E-fit theory to explain the lack of fit between resources in the field of social work, which was the college education, and the demands of the environment, which was working in the field of social work. The lack of resources in college education refers to the lack of field training prior to newly graduated social workers transitioning to the field of child protective services.

Application of P-E Fit Theory

P-E-fit theory has played a significant role in various research literature, from vocational psychology to human resource management, and has covered several perspectives in these areas, including the employee, employer, organizations, and societal (De Cooman, 2022). Koffka (1935) explains it as "the whole is other than the sum of its parts," which implies that something is more complex than it appears to be, and an individual's behavior cannot be fully understood without examining what causes the behavior in isolation. Applying this theory to the field of social work could insinuate that the field is more complex than it appears to be, and a newly graduated social worker's behavior cannot be fully examined without understanding what factors in the field of social work caused the behavior.

The assumptions of the P-E-fit theory state that due to the nature of human thinking and behavior, an individual's attributes are better suited for specific types of environments, and not suited for others (Lewin, 1951**).** Furthermore, it is believed that the type or lack of fit between the individual and the environment may cause a change in the individual's perception of the job in a behavioral, mental, or physical context (Edwards et al., 1998). Newly graduated social workers are initially drawn to the field of social work

because they have studied the field of social work by completing a BSW or MSW in their collegiate experience. Studying the field of social work is what enhances the natural attraction to enter the field upon graduation, making the educational factor the foundation for compatibility.

Once the student graduates, they transition (is hired) into the field of social work and begin to assess if there is an environmental match, which is often based on the newly graduated social worker's expectations derived from their classroom knowledge, and their delegated duties in the field. This is when the disruption in the "fit" occurs due to the newly graduated social worker entering the field and realizing that they did not receive adequate field training prior to graduation. Research that occurred over a 45-year time span on newly qualified social workers showed that their understanding of the field during their collegiate experience does not accurately reflect the needs or experiences they encounter when they transition into the field (Battaglia, 2020). This current study sought to understand the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers, with attention to their perception of their educational preparation and preparedness for the actual work.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Social Workers/Child Protective Services

Social workers play an optimal role in the protection of children. As defined by the National Association of Social Workers, social workers are noted as the most appropriate individuals capable of advocating for and protecting children and families in the field of social work. Social workers receive education through extensive training to

ensure that they have the fundamentals needed to recognize the dynamics of the role that they play in the lives of the vulnerable children and families that they encounter. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1980 (Leung et al., 2021) created educational programs that provide states with federal and monetary resources, educational support, and reimbursements designed to recruit and strengthen child welfare workers (which will be referenced as social workers) with pursuing and completing their educational requirements, which are a BSW or an MSW, accompanied by the proper licensure. Social workers work for state departments of health and human services, which are agencies authorized by the state to respond to allegations of child abuse and/or child neglect (Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Social Workers in This Study

For this study, a social worker (SW) is one who works directly with vulnerable children and their families, in the field of child protective services. CPS is an institution that specializes in ensuring the welfare and safety of children in the community (National Association of Social Workers, 2025). CPS is a division of safety that works on the state and local level and is officially required by law to conduct initial assessments/investigations of child abuse and neglect that has occurred or is likely to occur at the hands of anyone in the vicinity of a child (DePanfilis, 2003). During an initial assessment/investigation, if there is reason to believe that a child is in danger, a SW is then assigned to work with the child and family until the threat of danger is no longer present.

For the purposes of this study and understanding the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers in the field of CPS transitioning from education to practice, the newly graduated social worker transitioned into the field of CPS directly after graduating from college, and worked in the field 2 years or less. Jansen (2018) stated that newly graduated social workers often describe their experiences as challenging due to the complexities of working in CPS. The study cannot understand the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers in the field of CPS if the newly graduated social worker did not work in the field of CPS.

Academic and Professional Practice Prior to Entering the Field

Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2022) found that there are significant gaps and tension between academic programs and professional practice which led to new graduates feeling low levels of readiness for practice and a lack of field education. Academic programs during a student's collegiate experience provides the student with makeshift scenarios of "if A happens, then we do B," however, if the student has not engaged in the experience first-hand, they can't truly be prepared for it. Biggerstaff et al., (1998) stated that "competence is the end result of actual job performance, however, readiness occurs during the preparation phase prior to a SW entering the field." Kane (1994, p. 139) further stated that readiness for practice occurs when a SW has been prepared to oversee situations that occur when they transition to the field of CPS. Moreover, in an attempt to understand the need to put an emphasis on merging academic programs with extensive practice prior to placing new graduates in the field, Wright (2023) completed a qualitative study that investigated SW's who lacked the knowledge and applicable skillsets to

complete their job. Findings from this current study also indicated that caseworkers needed extensive hands-on training, social service training, and experience in the field to prepare them for their position.

During the collegiate experience, an individual working towards a BSW is required to complete 400 hours of supervised in the field training, while an individual working towards an MSW must receive 900 hours of supervised field instruction (Council of Social Work Education, 2025). The goal of field training is to prepare newly graduated social workers to work on their own once they transition. Although the number of hours a newly graduated social worker has to achieve before graduation may seem adequate, newly graduated social workers have shown that they are not prepared once the transition into the field occurs.

Transitioning Into the Field of Social Work

It is assumed that social workers are prepared for the field upon graduation, however, data has shown that this information is inaccurate. A qualitative study by Henriksen (2021) used data from three focus groups; one being social workers in their last year of academia, one group after their first year in the profession, and the last group after 5 years in the profession. The author found that students felt ill-prepared to enter the field. Jansen (2018) interviewed newly graduated social workers regarding their daily experiences, and found that social workers were full of emotional strain and uncertainty about their professional roles. Newly graduated social workers have stated that not enough emphasis was placed on field experience and how to merge education with practice prior to transitioning. Based on the findings of Agllias (2010), newly graduated

social workers reported that field experience was insufficient in preparing them for the transition to the workplace. This lack of preparation led to uncertainty about their professional roles among newly graduated social workers. Tham and Lynch (2014) indicated that newly graduated social workers wished they obtained more practical training during their collegiate experience to better prepare them for the transition. This extensive training may have provided an accurate depiction of the realities newly graduated social workers could expect after college.

Lastly, when questioning newly graduated social workers about their lived experiences, it was stated that being better prepared for the transition into the field would help ease feelings of anxiety, not knowing what to expect, and burnout (Glassburn, 2020). For these reasons, more research can potentially fill in the gap to understand what additional educational and practical skills need to be implemented during the collegiate experience. Such efforts may better prepare social workers to understand expectations and successfully carry them out once they transition into CPS.

Factors Contributing to the Inability to Retain Newly Graduated Social Workers

Social worker retention has become a task that the field has yet to master, while the need for social workers continues to increase. Blosser et al., (2010) stated that there is a prediction that there will be a shortage of social workers, and this shortage has the potential to be imminent. For the field of social work to thrive and be successful in being an advocate for children, retaining social workers is a necessity (McKitterick, 2012). Social service institutions are lacking in maintaining the employment of social workers due to worker fatigue, increased workloads, worker to client ratio, low pay, inadequate

supervision or the lack of supervisory guidance, and a lack of time for implementing self-care in the worker's private life (Saitadze & Dvalishvili 2022).

In a quantitative study by Bae et al., (2020), results suggested a connection between social work practitioners' vulnerability, psychological distress, and burnout, however, there is a lack of research focusing on the retention of social workers. Findings in the above-mentioned study displayed implications for addressing these issues and formulating effective ways to promote retention in the field of social work. Grant et al., (2022) have postulated that if a social worker creates a way to manage their emotions during their work experience in stressful situations, the field may be able to increase retention. Increasing retention may aid in reducing social worker burnout due to potentially decreasing social worker case load, which increases when social workers are constantly leaving the field. Sohn and Jang (2019) reported that if social workers can create a positive work-life balance then the field may be able to increase retention, while Lloyd et al., (2002) presumed that creating a positive environment of work autonomy has the potential for an increase in social worker retention. Lastly, Barbee et al., (2018) stated that creating an atmosphere conducive to supporting social workers and fostering a positive work environment after their transition begins with supervision, which is a crucial part in social worker retention. The ability to retain newly graduated social workers may depend on newly graduated social workers being equipped with the proper education and preparedness prior to transitioning into the field.

Social Worker Supervision

In the field of social work, it is important that newly graduated social workers have a supervisor who cares about their well-being and the families that they interact with. Saltiel (2016) proposes that proper supervision is critical in preparing newly graduated social workers for the field. This preparation occurs when the newly graduated social worker shadows the experienced supervisor, when the experienced supervisor provides constructive feedback to the newly graduated social worker with a goal to increase the newly graduated social worker's decision-making skills, and by promoting accountability for the experienced supervisor and the newly graduated social worker. Zinn (2015) performed an exploratory study on a sum of 1460 social workers and concluded that there was an increased level of job satisfaction within the work environment when there was a positive relationship between the supervisors and the employees.

A qualitative study by Jacquet et al., (2008) consisting of 765 social workers with MSWs suggested that the leading cause of retaining social workers was a lack of support from their supervisors. A study by Cooksey-Campbell et al., (2013) of 45 social workers found that there was a decrease in job related stress when the social workers had supervisors present. In addition to a decrease in job related stress, Quinn et al., (2019) found that quality supervision increases social worker's productivity and heightens feelings of self-worth. Studies have shown that not only is quality supervision necessary, but it should be provided early in the newly graduated social workers entrance into the field.

Weiss-Dagan et al., (2020) stated that there are situations where the social worker's levels of work-related trauma and work-related stress are so high, that by the time a supervisor decides to show support, the social worker is ready to leave the field. This suggests that supervision needs to be timely and effective. A qualitative study by Turner and Jack (2017) of 28 social workers who were moving towards entering the field of social work found that social workers were dissatisfied with the supervision that they were currently receiving because supervision practices were not geared towards helping them navigate and improve themselves, but predominately focused on case management. Furthermore, Bostock et al., (2019) suggested that supervision should be of quality, which means that the supervisor is providing emotional and educational support that directly enhances the social worker's performance in and out of the field.

For a supervisor to set a newly graduated social worker up for success, they must understand how the social worker functions in practice. To achieve this, the supervisor should provide direct guidance by demonstrating the necessary skills and observing the social worker as they implement them in the field. A quantitative study by Smith et al., (2022) indicated that students verbalized that field education was the most important learning tool for them to succeed. Newly graduated social workers have a general idea of what they will face when they begin to interact with the families placed in their case load, however; what they see on paper is no comparison to what they experience in person.

Summary and Conclusions

The field of social work has been one with a continuous need for improvements regarding the livelihood of newly graduated social workers (Petersen, 2023). During the

transition process from education to experience, newly graduated social workers are not provided with the necessary tools to successfully complete their job in the new profession. The profession comes with an enormous amount of stress due to the nature of the job; however, newly graduated social workers encounter additional stress when working in environments with low pay, limited supervisory support, and a lack of knowledge about how to complete their job responsibilities (Henriksen, 2021). Studies have suggested that reducing caseloads, increasing supervision, and increasing pay for social workers will be beneficial in implementing change in the field; however, the lived experiences and retention rates of newly graduated social workers continues to decline. As the need for social workers will not decrease due to the constant conflicts that children and families encounter, this area warrants further examination to identify strategies for promoting positive change. In Chapter 3, I described the research design, rationale, methodology and ethical procedures that was used in the study. In Chapter 3, I collected data via one-on-one interviews in addition to data collection, sampling, and instrumentation.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Social workers strive to make a positive impact in the lives of vulnerable children and their families daily, while fighting their own battles in and out of the field. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers once they transitioned from education to the field of CPS. I interviewed newly graduated social workers who had worked in the field for 2 years or less. Information gained in this study provided insight into the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers and the current disconnect between education and the skills needed in the field of CPS. This chapter includes information about qualitative phenomenological design including the rationale, methodology, methods of participant selection, data collection methods, and instrumentation. Limitations and ethical considerations are also addressed in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Newly graduated social workers play an important role in advocating for vulnerable children and their families. In this study, I explored the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers during their transition from education into the field of CPS. During my recruitment of newly graduated social workers, I collected demographic information including age, gender, race, location, agency worked for, social worker degree held, and years of experience after graduation. The following research question guided the study: What are the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of child protective services?

I initially considered performing a qualitative secondary analysis (QSA). A QSA enables a researcher to use precollected data for a purpose different from the initial purpose for which the data were collected (Heaton, 2008). If QSA had been applied, time would have been saved during the research process; however, after additional research on the topic, I determined that there were not enough QSA data available to conduct the QSA.

A grounded theory design was also considered for this study; however, it was not deemed appropriate because grounded theory research focuses on developing a new theory based on data obtained (see McLeod, 2024). Additionally, ethnography was considered for this study; however, it involves the researcher placing themselves in the community and observing the behaviors and interactions directly (Ploder & Hamann, 2021). This design was inappropriate because I needed information from participants regarding their experiences transitioning to the field of CPS.

Therefore, the design chosen was a phenomenological qualitative design. The goal of phenomenological research is to explain the nature of things by looking at how people experience them (Giorgi, 2009). Furthermore, a phenomenological design is appropriate because lived experiences can only be obtained from those who have had a direct experience in the phenomenon that is being studied (Billups, 2019).

Phenomenology is a principle that is mostly drawn from the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl is deemed as the putative founder of phenomenological philosophy, stating that phenomenology has two meanings, one being “a new type of descriptive method,” and “a priori science extracted from it,” (Husserl,

1973). Heidegger's (1988, p.164) interpretation of phenomenology stated "when it comes to subject matter, phenomenology derives from the science of the being of entities (ontology)," and "the methodological definition of phenomenological description is interpretation." Interpretation is deemed a pivotal aspect of research, as it helps explain how self and the world coincide.

The phenomena in this research study were the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned to the field of child protective services, specifically as to whether they perceived that they have been adequately prepared for the demands of their job through education and experience. Phenomenological research allowed the researcher to analyze the feelings, perceptions, and beliefs of the newly graduated social worker via understanding their experiences. Through applying phenomenological research, I identified the proposed subjective nature of the research question by obtaining descriptive information from the participants on their experiences in the work field.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is entrusted with the task of collecting data that is geared towards a positive outcome of the study. A positive outcome in this study would mean that the researcher has captured the lived experiences of newly graduated social worker's thoughts, experiences and perspectives, and gained meaningful data to support it. Billups (2019) argued that the researcher is seen as an individual who is equipped with the necessary tools to properly identify the physical, emotional, and cognitive association(s) between a proposed study and potential participants. The

researcher then initiates the study, completes the study, and makes final determinations on the relevancy or outcome of the study.

As I prepared for my study, I put away any pre-biased thoughts that I had regarding my firsthand experiences in the field of CPS. Karagiozis (2018) stated that "moral conflicts can occur even in the most systematically and organized study." Learning how to think with an open mind allows a researcher to gather information based on the participants' point of view versus preconceived notions that the researcher may intentionally or unintentionally have. Simkus (2023) stated that during research there can be observer bias, which occurs when the experimenter or researcher's expectation, opinions, perspectives, or prejudices have an impact on the outcome of the experiment. Karagiozis (2018) also pointed out that there is an effect called "observer-expectancy effect," in which a researcher's inherited biasedness causes them to subconsciously influence the results of the study during their interactions with the participants. As a researcher, maintaining a clear mindset before beginning the study is essential to ensure that personal bias or negative thoughts do not influence the research.

During the preparation phase for this study, I enhanced my proficiency in listening and verbal communication. Becoming a certified Master Life Coach this year has afforded me the opportunity to master the art of "listening to understand," versus "listening to respond." This technique helps guide the researcher toward obtaining information about the actual events transpired, rather than responding to or perceiving what the researcher expects to occur. Tennant et al., (2023) stated that an active listener pays attention to the speaker's feelings and views versus just hearing their words.

Following this guideline showed me how to recognize verbal and nonverbal cues communicated by the speaker and ensured that I was listened in a manner that supported my understanding and interpretation of their message. Nonverbal communication would have been helpful during the interviews; however, because the interviews were audio-only, nonverbal cues were not applicable.

Patience is another skill that I exhibited. During my experience working in the field of CPS and other areas where individuals have expressed trauma, I learned that showing patience provided individuals the time and space to open up. Individuals tend to provide less detailed information when they feel rushed compared to when they are comfortable and have the time to express themselves. Therefore, I aimed to make participants feel as comfortable as possible, because I believe this research can inform agencies on preparing newly graduated social workers and contribute to a positive change within the field of CPS. I was dedicated to fully understanding the experiences of the newly graduated social workers and I gave them my full attention, time, and patience.

I had no current or prior relationships with any participants in this study. Additionally, I did not hold supervisory positions within the field, reducing the likelihood that participants felt obligated to respond in a manner intended to protect their job security. Qualitative research required considerable time, particularly for scheduling interviews, transcribing data, and verifying data accuracy. Furthermore, participants received a $10 gift card as a non-cash incentive to acknowledge their contribution to the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

In this study, I interviewed newly graduated social workers who transitioned to the field of CPS within the past 2 years with a BSW or MSW. I used a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit participants who directly experienced the phenomena (Creswell and Baez, 2020). Participant selection was based on responses to a screening checklist confirming they met the inclusion criteria. During the interviewing stage, I strived to interview a minimum of 10 participants to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences in the field. Kostere and Kostere (2021) pointed out that during qualitative research, if data collection requires individual interviews, then it is recommended that a sample size is between 8 and 15 participants. Although Kostere and Kostere (2021) did not suggest how many participants are needed specifically for data saturation, it is stated that the researcher has reached data saturation once no new data is obtained, and the information that the researcher has collected is rich and substantial. The proposed number of participants that I sought to use for this study fell under that category.

In a qualitative research design, factors that determine sample sizes include, "how complex a study is, which qualitative design will be used, which resources will be used, and the extensive use of data collected" (Creswell & Baez, 2020, p.113). In addition to the above-mentioned factors, saturation will be an important aspect to consider. Saturation is essential in determining the sample size and occurs when the researcher concludes that no additional information can be obtained (Kostere and Kostere, 2021).

Data collection ceased once saturation was reached. I determined that saturation was reached when new data no longer contributed significant information or offered new insights to the study. Additional narratives about newly graduated social worker's lived experiences did not reveal any new perspectives on working in the field of CPS.

Procedures for Recruitment and Participation

The recruitment process involved making posts on different social media outlets, reaching out to local CPS agencies, and utilizing the Walden Participant Pool. Flyers and social media posts included the reason for the study, the inclusion criteria, and an explanation of how the study would be completed. The flyers and social media posts provided my email address and participants was asked to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. When participants contacted me, I provided a clear explanation of the purpose of the study, criteria for eligibility in participating, how much time the study would take to complete, any benefits they would receive for participating, and to see if they would like to move forward with the screening process.

Once it was determined that participants met criteria for participation and an interview was scheduled, I collected the participant's demographic information (age, gender, race, location, agency worked for, social worker degree held, and years of experience after graduation). Once this information was obtained, I addressed any questions the participants had and explained the purpose of the interview and data collection process. I also informed participants of the risks associated with the study, provided contact information for the Walden Research Participant Advocate, and

explained that the interview would be audio recorded and shared only with individuals directly related to the study.

Data Collection

Ruslin et al., (2022) stated that a semi-structured interview is a powerful interview technique because it allows a researcher to gather in-depth information and evidence from the participants being interviewed, while also considering the focus of the study. The preferred method for the interviews were in person; however, all interviews occurred via a password protected Zoom link sent through email. Interviews were one-on-one so that each participant had their privacy, Interviews were structured with an ample amount of time to ensure that the participants were not rushed. I started the interviews by explaining the interview procedure.

Additionally, I explained that the participant was free to leave at any time if they felt uncomfortable or no longer want to participate. I also asked whether they had any questions, and reviewed the consent form again before proceeding with the interview questions, which are provided in Appendix A. This process took the longest as I collected as much detailed information as possible and followed up with questions for clarification. Upon conclusion of the interviews, I advised the participants that I was grateful for their participation in the study, and if any additional questions were needed for clarification after the interview's transcript was reviewed, I would reach out to them via email.

Data Analysis Plan

In this study, I used thematic analysis to examine the research questions. Thematic analysis helped the study by identifying any common patterns, thoughts, or

behaviors that the participants shared. Naeem et al., (2023) speculated that thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research, and is guided by six steps or phases, which include discovering keywords, coding, theming, interpreting the information obtained, and developing a conceptual model. To properly examine the research, I ensured that I familiarized myself with the dataset by thoroughly reviewing the transcripts from a visual point of view, and by listening to the transcripts to ensure that what I saw and what I heard coincided. Per Braun and Clarke (2022) continuously reviewing the transcripts will ensure that the outcome of the study is accurate.

The next step that I completed during this study was sorting out the themes and codes. After conducting a thorough review of the transcripts, I systematically analyzed the datasets by completing a comparison between them and determining what information was meaningful to the study and what information served no purpose. This included removing data that did not have enough information to support the purpose (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and utilizing the themes that were relevant by breaking them down into useful subthemes. Moving onto the next step, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of each theme by naming the themes, and identifying and highlighting individual experiences shared by each participant. During the final stage, I used Microsoft Word to code the data. The initial thought was to use either NVivo software or MAXQDA software to code the data; however, due to the complexities of the software and the expertise that it required, Microsoft Word was more applicable.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research seeks to make a positive impact in the world without compromising validity, while answering the questions of "who, what, when, where, and how (Leung, 2015). Qualitative research studies require validity, trustworthiness, and generalizability (Leung, 2015). Validity as described by Creswell and Baez (2020) makes an implication that a study is truthful and genuine. The truthfulness of a qualitative research study is established by the researcher, the individuals participating in the study which are the participants, and the individual(s) reading the study (Creswell & Baez, 2020). Validity ensures that a study is appropriate by analyzing the tools used, sampling and data analysis, and if the results of the study are valid (Leung, 2015). The Lincoln and Guba framework was used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the study, based on key elements of dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Lastly, member checking, which is also known as participant validation, was used to verify the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information received from the participants (Birt et al., 2016).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility seeks to explain if findings made by a researcher can be trusted to the point where they can provide a comprehensive interpretation of the data that was collected (Enworo, 2023). The information collected should positively represent the phenomena portrayed in the study. Enworo (2023) further stated that establishing credibility can be achieved through prolonged engagement, continuous observation, triangulation, debriefing, negative case analysis, and checking

with participants (member checking). During this study, I placed an emphasis on triangulation and reflexivity.

Triangulation occurs when evidence is pulled from multiple sources to provide a detailed synopsis of the phenomena being studied. The specific type of triangulation that was used for this study is data triangulation. Per Spake et al., (2024) data triangulation involves using different data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, observations, and document analysis. I utilized peer review articles and theories that were found in Chapter 2 to highlight the evidence found for this study.

Reflexivity was also used to alleviate any pre-biased thoughts or concerns. Per Creswell and Baez, (2020) reflexivity occurs when a qualitative researcher positions themselves directly in the research, identifying any seen or unforeseen bias, values, and experiences that the researcher is voluntarily or involuntarily bringing towards their readers and participants. Per Creswell and Baez (2020) there are two focal points for a researcher to convey to their participants which consist of the researcher explaining their firsthand experiences with the phenomena, and how their subjective experiences have shaped the phenomena. For the specified phenomena in this study, my experiences were discussed later in this paper.

Transferability

In qualitative research, the goal of the study is for the researcher to create findings that can be used and interpreted by other researchers conducting a similar study and where results are based on interpretation of information received (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). For readers to generate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, there must be

detailed descriptions from the beginning to the end of the study. In my current research study, I established transferability by transcribing my conversations with participants in an audio version and a written version, with coding being completed by using thematic analysis coding. Thematic analysis coding assisted in identifying themes found in the study.

Dependability

The next element of trustworthiness in qualitative research is dependability, which consists of participants evaluating the findings, interpretations and recommendations obtained from the researcher's data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The goal is to ensure that there is consistency, that the data analysis process is consistent with the accepted standards for the specific design, and that the interpretations of the data are strictly focused on the interpretation of the data collected versus the researcher's personal preferences (Korstiens & Moser, 2018). There are several strategies that a researcher can use to ensure that dependability is present, and they include; external audits, triangulation, and comprehensive descriptions of the study (McGinley et al., 2021). I achieved dependability by highlighting a detailed description of how the participants were recruited and selected, and what methods were used to collect and interpret the data to provide rationale for why this method was chosen.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the last stage in achieving rigor in this qualitative study. Confirmability focuses on the impartiality and objectivity of the perceived findings of a study (Ahmed, 2024). The goal of comfortability is to ensure that there are no biases

found in the study, and that the study depicts a truthful representation of the research participants (McGinley et al., 2021). Researchers have suggested several strategies to use to ensure comfortability such as peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling (Ahmed, 2024); however, per Billups (2024), the most appropriate strategies for qualitative research are reflexivity and audit trails. Although using a peer reviewer was an initial thought to enhance trustworthiness, due to time constraints and the sufficiency of other validation methods, specifically member checking and audit trails, I maintained credibility without using the peer reviewing process.

Ethical Procedures

Ethics is a principle that guides and shapes the proper conduct of a researcher (Miteu, 2024). Researchers are imposed with a duty of responsibly managing data collected, using resources in a positive way, respecting the human rights of participants, being socially responsible, promoting honesty and integrity, and disposing of information once a study has been completed (Resnik, 2020). Each area of practice has their own set rules for conducting research in an ethical way, and per McLeod (2023), ethical considerations in psychology also include informed consent, debriefing, and confidentiality. To prepare for this study, I ensured that I reviewed the APA guidelines on ethical procedures. I also reviewed procedures for gaining informed consent through the Institutional Review Board and advised participants of the specific details of the study, including what information will and will not be shared.

I took an additional to explain to participants which entities would receive the shared information. I advised participants that follow-up questions will be asked for

clarity. I was open and honest with the participants, and they were open and honest with me. To be socially responsible, I did not share information between participants or reach out to any agencies regarding the information that the participants shared.

Participants were questioned about personal experiences. I advised them that I had a duty to report any behavior that involved child abuse or neglect that was currently occurring, or neglect that has already occurred and is endangering children. Such reports would be made to the local Department of Children's Services, Department of Child and Family Services, or the Department of Human Resources. Participants were notified that their name was not provided in the study to protect their privacy, and participants were notified that their name and contact information may be shared with Walden University during the study. Walden University is also required to keep participant's contact information confidential. Lastly, the participants were notified that their information will be locked away in a secure allocated place once the study is over, due to Walden University requiring that the information be kept at least 5 years after the study was completed.

During the recruitment process, I explained to the participants that I did not have personal relationships with any organizations that they might have spoken about during their interview. I also explained to the participants that my recruitment process would be based on the individual's knowledge of CPS and how long ago they were in the field. I further explained that if a participant is not selected, it had nothing to do with their age, race, culture, or gender; however, if they were a suitable selection for the study, it was based on their experiences and satisfying the criteria.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained why I used a phenomenological qualitative research design to address research questions. I also described my role as the researcher, including how I managed any preconceived bias. I outlined the inclusion and exclusion criteria that individuals needed to meet to participate in the study. Additionally, I explained that purposeful sampling was used as a method of participant selection, and that recruitment occurred by using social media outlets, local CPS agencies and the Walden Participant Pool.

Moreover, I described what methods were used to guide screening questions, interview questions, and data analysis. I explained why thematic analysis was used to analyze data, and provided a detailed description of key issues related to trustworthiness, such as, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Next, I described how these factors ensured rigor throughout the study. I concluded the chapter by ensuring that the study was conducted in an ethical manner by protecting the human rights of the participants. In Chapter 4, I present research findings that focuses on the participant's demographics, settings, characteristics, methods of data collection, data analysis, and how trustworthiness was established in the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the lived experienced of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of CPS. The following research question was used: What are the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of child protective services? The unique stories and insights of participants could contribute to a positive social change by highlighting the needs of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field. In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the process and procedures used in this study, which include the interview setting, participant demographics, data collection process, and data analysis process. Additionally, I offer evidence of trustworthiness by discussing the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I end this chapter by summarizing the findings and themes resulting from this research.

Settings

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio-recorded. Before the recording began, I explained to the participants that the camera would be turned off to ensure their privacy. All participants agreed to audio-recording only. All participants expressed comfort in completing the interviews via audio-recording. During data collection, I did not find or know of any conditions that affected or influenced the participants. Although the interviews were conducted via Zoom, I obtained locations of the participants. Two participants lived and worked in Tennessee, four participants lived and worked in Alabama, and one participant lived and worked in California. I conducted the interviews in the privacy of my work office that had a closed door and no one else in

it, or in a private location in my home where no one was present to hear the interview as it was being recorded.

Demographics

Seven individuals participated in the study and reported their demographic information. Participants were asked to provide their race, gender, age, time worked at the agency, state, and how they learned about the study. I assigned a code to each participant as a pseudonym by using "P" for participant followed by a sequential number of their interview (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

All seven participants identified themselves as cisgender female. Although I did not target Black or African Americans to participate, every participant identified as Black or African American. Three participants were between the ages of 25 and 34, three participants were between the ages of 35 and 44, and one participant was between the ages of 45 and 54. At the time of the interviews, participants' total time worked for the agency varied from 4.5 months to 2 years. Four participants learned about the study through a peer (word of mouth), and three participants learned about the study through social media.

Data Collection

Data collection began on February 7th, 2025, after receiving IRB approval February 6th (#02-06-25-0373716). A flyer with information about the study was posted on different social media outlets. The study was also posted on Walden University's Participant Pool, which allows doctoral students to post approved study announcements to connect with individuals who voluntarily choose to participate in research. Additional

emails were submitted to local CPS agencies and the Department of Human Resources agencies. As outlined by the flyer, people who were interested in participating in the study contacted me via email or the phone number provided. Once a response was received from interested participants, I emailed them a Google form which held a screening questionnaire for them to complete.

Upon receiving the completed screening questionnaires and confirming that the individuals met inclusion criteria, I emailed them a separate Google form which held the interview sign-up form, and explained to them that the consent form would be sent 24 hours prior to the interview. The consent form provided the participants with essential information pertaining to interview procedures, voluntary nature of the study, risks associated with the study, privacy rights, benefits of participating in the study, and contact information for Walden's University Research Participant Advocate. On the day of the interviews, I reviewed the consent form with the participants, and had the participants verbally state that they consented to the interview. Interviews took place during the week and on the weekend.

Due to participants working different days and times, I was flexible with the time-slots that I made available. The earliest interview that I conducted was at 9 am CST, and the latest interview that I conducted was at 7 pm CST. Initially, 10 interviews were started, however, after verifying participants met inclusion criteria at the beginning of the interview, a total of seven participants were interviewed. Three of the interviews were not completed. One participant disclosed after the interview began that they did not work for CPS. Another participant revealed that they were still completing their MSW and had not

yet been conferred in a role. The last participant was excluded from the study as their responses raised concerns about the authenticity of their eligibility. Six of the interviews occurred during the week, and one interview occurred during the weekend, on a Saturday morning.

Interviews were held via Zoom, and each individual was sent a private link to join the meeting. Once the meeting began, my camera was turned off, and I instructed all participants to turn their cameras off before I started the recording. One participant did have noise in the background as she stated that she was on vacation, however, she was in a private room and the noise did not impede the data collection process. A semistructured interview guide was used to collect data for the study with 15 initial open-ended questions (Appendix A). Follow-up questions were asked as needed to ensure that rich, thick data was collected (Giorgi, 2009). All seven interviews were conducted using the English language. Each interview was debriefed by asking the participants if they had anything to add before closing.

Additionally, I used active listening skills throughout the interviewing process. This included limiting interruptions while the participants were speaking, summarizing data, paraphrasing for accuracy, and asking follow-up questions for clarity. I immersed myself in the data by listening to every zoom interview, transcribing the interviews, and reviewing the transcripts to ensure that times, dates, verbiage, questions, and answers aligned. This process of reviewing the transcripts and audio occurred a minimum of 5-6 times per interview to ensure that the elements of the participant's utterances were documented correctly. Member checking was needed for one participant and was

conducted via a phone call to obtain clarity on one of their responses. The interviews were recorded through Zoom Workplace. Once an interview was completed, I downloaded the interview on a transcribing website called Krisp. Once the interview was transcribed, I printed the transcription, and listened to the interview again to ensure that the interview was properly transcribed. The interviews lasted between 13 and 29 minutes. The data collection method remained the same as those presented in Chapter 3.

Data Analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's six phase reflective thematic analysis to evaluate the study's data in this research. The study used a bottom-up approach to data analysis, following the framework created by Braun and Clark (2006). Instead of applying preexisting categories and theoretical frameworks, this analysis was grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. Codes, categories, and themes were directly created from the raw data, which allowed patterns to naturally emerge without preconceived assumptions. This approach was best suited to fit this study's exploratory aim, which was understanding the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of CPS.

Braun and Clarke (2022) argued that thematic analysis is widely utilized to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning by creating datasets. I originally decided to use NVivo software to code my data, which was discussed in Chapter 3; however, due to the complexities and technical skills required to use NVivo software, I decided to use the ingrained functions on Microsoft Word to complete the initial phase of qualitative analysis for this research study (La Pelle, 2004).

During the initial phase of data analysis, I assigned the participants mock names to protect their identities and confidentiality. Data were also stored under the mock names. Next, I organized the interview data into tables, which were organized by the study's theoretical framework (P-E fit theory), participant's mock names, interview questions, and the participant's responses (La Pelle, 2004). Giorgi (2012) stated that a researcher should read each interview transcript and field notes to acquire a sense of the interview experience as a whole. In phase one, I familiarized myself with the data by continuously reading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, and ensuring that the written transcripts matched the audio. I then made a mental shift to start phenomenological reduction, which allowed me the ability to experience the written descriptions as a phenomenon, rather than an event to be interpreted (Moustakas, 1994).

In the following phase, I noted my analytical impressions for each transcript separately, and matched it to the raw data to ensure alignment (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This analytical process followed Creswell and Baez's (2020) recommendation of bracketing and checking preconceived ideas and notions regarding the experience in transcendental phenomenology. I then went through three cycles of coding to identify emergent codes, removed codes that did not align, and grouped codes that had similar meanings. After this iterative process, 56 usable codes were identified and determined to be mutually exclusive. The emergent codes were sorted for similarity and then categorized in a manner that related back to the research question. After narrowing down the codes and placing them into certain categories, I used a deductive approach to identify 13 codes for data analysis through in-depth literature review (See table 2).

Following, I added an inductive approach to seek quotes, words, and phrases that could align with different aspects of the broad preset codes (Apriori codes) and the TMSC (Bergin, 2018).

The next step was to convert the categories into themes. This process was completed by systematically analyzing the datasets and identifying which sections were meaningful to the study, and would most effectively support answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The categories went through a grouping and regrouping process multiple times to establish maximum saturation and ensure that the final categories precisely reflected the data collected, while remaining consistent with the data set, prior literature, and the theoretical framework (Bergin, 2018). In phase four, I reviewed categories found in the previous phase, the literature and the theoretical framework, and used this to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). From this data emerged five themes. figure 1 provides insight on how I moved from Apriori codes, to generating categories and turning them into themes. To ensure qualitative rigor, I situated every emergent theme by describing the findings associated with each theme, using direct participant quotes to support the themes, and providing insight into understanding the research question (Lincoln & Guba,1985).

Table 1

Codes, Categories, and Themes

A priori code	Category	Theme
Peer guidance	Informal mentorship	Mentorship
Support needed	Onboarding support	
Peer support		
Mentorship impact		
Indirect mentorship		
Field learning curve	Practical experience	Role transition
Role adjustment	Professional development	
Experience-based learning	Early role demands	
On-the-job learning		
Self-directed work		
Immediate supervisor praise	Emotional encouragement	Supervisory support
Empathetic understanding	Interview support	
Supervisor caseload divide	Supportive leadership style	
Minimal field involvement	Collaborative guiding	
Field-based supervision		
Tool-based support		
Support system value		
Direct supervision		
Supervisor constraints	Supervisor role structure	Systematic pressure
High expectations		
Supervisor role structure		
Pay disparity		
Undercompensated role		
CPS stigma		
Internship mandate	Fieldwork requirements	Training gap
Brief training	Training duration	
Unrealistic training		

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To establish credibility, I used various strategies including attentiveness to triangulation of data sources, obtaining informed consent from participants, effective planning, and reflective journaling. I included participants who represented various ages (25-54 years of age). I ensured that participants were comfortable sharing their lived experiences by explaining the informed consent process and their rights to leave the study at any time. I precisely followed a structured data collection and analysis process by using audio recordings. I also used triangulation to address credibility via the existing literature in Chapter 2 to assist in developing themes during the data analysis process. Billups (2019) pointed out that when you build evidence from a multitude of sources, this provides an in-depth picture of the phenomenon that you have researched, and further supports triangulation. Moreover, member checking certifies that the themes developed from research accurately depicts what the participant meant to say (Creswell & Baez, 2020). Lastly, to enhance credibility, participants were seen at the beginning of the interview to verify their identity prior to starting the recording.

Transferability

Transferability in research seeks to understand which findings can be applied to other contexts. In this study, transferability was established by providing a thick description of the data obtained from research participant's interviews, how data was collected, analyzed, and the connection between said information and theory. Rich, and detailed descriptions of the participants' backgrounds, lived experiences, and CPS

environment were also collected to help capture common themes and unique variations amongst the participants. It is also important to notate that the results were not generalizable. This aligns with Creswell and Baez (2020) who indicates that participants' experiences, world views, personal views, and perceptions varies in qualitative research. This supports the concept of transferability in qualitative research, making it possible for readers to determine the degree to which the findings resonate to their own experiences, particularly those in similar fields such as social work educators and child welfare practitioners.

Data saturation was achieved by conducting multiple interviews over the course of 2 months, and ensuring that the interviews provided meaningful insight into the study's phenomena. Although 10 participants started the interview process, data saturation was reached with seven participants. One participant failed to meet the requirements of the study upon asking additional questions during the interview. One participant did not work in the field of CPS, and one participant's responses raised concerns about alignment with the inclusion criteria, and therefore their data were excluded and the interview promptly ended.

As stated in by Kostere and Kostere (2021) there is no recommended number of participants required for data saturation because saturation is reached when no new data emerge and the information obtained is rich and meaningful. Guest et al., (2006) found that saturation can be obtained during the first six to 12 interviews, specifically when the research question is focused. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that richness and quality of data outweighs quantity, emphasizing that smaller sample sizes can be

appropriate in reflective thematic analysis. Given the study's focus on the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers transitioning from education to practice and the in-depth of narrative data collected, seven interviews were sufficient to achieve thematic saturation.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to consistency and stability of the research findings over time. McGinley et al., (2021) postulated that dependability is found through external audits, triangulation, and rich descriptions of the research study. Additionally, dependability in this study was achieved through vigorous explanations of the participants' selection process, recruitment, participant procedures, and describing how the interviews were organized. An audit trail was created through documentation of each stage of coding via theme development. The data was visually supported through a thematic distribution chart, which showed a clear presentation of how codes appeared and how they were placed into broader themes. This visual illustration not only assisted in making the analytic process traceable, but it demonstrated consistency in the coding process. Using a priori and emergent codes reinforced the rigor of the process by allowing responsiveness to the data through structured analysis. Combining these strategies showed alignment in ensuring dependability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research suggests that findings from data is shaped by the participants' experiences. To achieve confirmability, I used direct quotes from the

participant interviews. Additionally, I maintained an audit trail of my coding decisions which aided in the formation of themes. Furthermore, I used active listening, summarizing, paraphrasing, and reflection to ensure accuracy in understanding the participants' responses. Furthermore, I conducted a rigorous review of each participant's Zoom interview and corresponding transcript. I listened to and analyzed the recordings, transcribed the interviews, and cross-verified that questions, answers, timestamps, and participant responses aligned.

I needed to follow up with one participant via phone to verify the accuracy of their response. As mentioned in Chapter 3, peer reviewing was not applied. To uphold confirmability and consistency, the study employed alternative methods such as member checking and an audit trail to establish transparency and objectivity in data interpretation. I also asked follow-up questions when needed and cross-checked codes and themes against the raw data to ensure accuracy. Lastly, I engaged in reflexivity by continually reflecting on any preconceived notions and personal biases.

Results

The research question used in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena was: What are the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of child protective services? After analyzing the data provided by the study's participants, five themes derived from the data, and they included mentorship, role transition, supervisory support, systematic pressure, and training gap.

Theme 1: Mentorship

Over the course of this study, several newly graduated social workers emphasized the impact of mentorship from individuals who were in a position to offer guidance, validate concerns, answer questions, and assist during high stress moments, especially at the start of their career. P4 explained how she would speak with her co-workers as a way to seek peer guidance by stating, "I would say like maybe just talking to like my co-workers, like maybe when you're at work you can share experiences and they tell you how to deal with a situation."

Additionally, participants described a strong need for structured mentorship immediately starting the position. P1 noted, "I think being direct and upfront with them regarding the type of work they're getting into and just being understanding when it comes to different situations." P3 stated, "Just being there, talking with us, showing us different tools that we could use." P4 expressed the need for a structured mentorship program, while P5 shared,

> I think the biggest thing is showing new graduates how to manage heavy caseloads. Coming up with a system of how to keep up with how many visits you've done…I think just really breaking it down little by little would help so much better… There's people who say, it's been done, but you're never told how to do it.

P7 described receiving informal mentorship through daily case discussions as, "So daily support would be discussing my cases, my case load, getting her advice on what she thinks I should do. And we discuss that before I go out and meet with the

family," while P6 emphasized the importance of having someone to turn to when making difficult decisions by sharing, "It absolutely made the job easier because you knew that even in the decision-making process, you also had someone else there to guide you." In addition to decision-making support, participants expressed the value of having mentors who can assess their growth areas. P6 revealed, "I think maybe first understanding the level of where the social worker is. And if there are some things that need to be built upon to be basically that construction worker to help build that social worker."

Lastly, P2 focused on the need for mentorship prior to getting into the field to acquire more knowledge by sharing, "Maybe try to shadow somebody, you know, to kind of get them more knowledge. So they can understand what the job actually entails." While mentorship plays a vital component in shaping professional development in the early stages of a newly graduated social worker, participants further expressed challenges brought on by trying to adapt to the realities of transitioning into the work field.

Theme 2: Role Transition

Participants expressed that transitioning from an academic setting to the field of CPS in the professional work field was an immensely stressful experience due to the transition being abrupt, immense, and unbearable. Furthermore, participants shared that despite receiving academic training, the complexities and immediacy of the role in CPS was a role shock. P2 stated, "I feel like a lot of the education that students get these days don't prepare you for the job," while P7 shared "My education prepared me as far as the paperwork and book knowledge of social work, but you really don't get the full

experience of being a social worker until you in the field working with the family and children."

This was an emerging theme across all interviews as P1 noted, "I think it's more experience. You have to learn it once you really get in the field and start experiencing it," while P6 expressed,

> Field experiences, which are part of the curriculum, is necessary so that you can see exactly what is happening and to have different types of agencies… And so having those real-life experiences and even shadowing with the supervisor, all those things make it a little bit clearer so that workers know what their role is and what they're about to experience.

Furthermore, participants expressed that the realities of transitioning into the field of child protective services were more abrupt than they anticipated, which highlighted a lack of structured onboarding and a reliance on real-time learning. For instance, P5 noted "We were educated on topics, but real life is different," whereas P4 shared, "You learn more as you go. Every day is different." For several participants, transitioning into child protective services exposed a deep shift in personal identity. P6 shared that "Social work is not a faint at heart job," while P4 expressed "we don't learn how to deal with the burnout and like you can actually get compassion fatigue."

Theme 3: Supervisory Support

Across interviews, majority of the participants described their relationships with supervisors as positive in the early stages of their transition into the field of CPS. For instance, P6 stated, "My supervisor was always encouraging…so that made the job easier

because you knew that even in the decision-making process, you also had someone else there to guide you." This type of interaction with the supervisor provided emotional reassurance, practical strategies and reinforced that mentorship went beyond formal structure. Another participant (P1) disclosed a positive experience by expressing "I think working with my supervisor, it makes my job easier because she's very understanding and she always makes herself available." Lastly, P4 pinpointed her positive experience with her supervisor through verbal communication, stating "I feel like I have pretty amazing supervisors…When I was emotional and stuff, they told me that they understood." Furthermore, P3 reported that her supervisor made her job easier by, "Just having that support system, just being there, talking with us, showing us different tools that we could use," while P2 shared "For my immediate supervisor, I received great support."

One participant described a negative experience with their supervisor, and how it affected their role as a social worker in the field of child protective services. P5 reported, "I had a supervisor that was, she strictly cared about the data. She didn't care whether or not I needed help with going on my visits…So, I didn't have much support from my supervisor at all. Another participant shared the need to simply have an open conversation with their supervisor, and how this can be a positive or negative experience. P7 expressed,

> Sometimes you don't see eye to eye with your supervisor on making decisions that you feel is best for the family when you went out to assess the situation…That can make your job harder when they're telling you to do one

> thing and you feel like as a social worker that's assessing this situation, you should do something else.

While supervisory support was a major factor in navigating the demands of the position, it was not always enough to combat the structural issues embedded within the system.

Theme 4: Systematic Pressure

Participants consistently identified organizational and structural challenges as barriers in their early career as a newly graduated social worker in the field of CPS. For instance, P6 stated,

> The stressor would have been just getting in on the end of… And so, the stressors going in and being assigned huge caseloads and some incomplete and being the one to step in and take over that and to be able to do that as well as training and learning the job itself.

The impact of high caseloads and unrealistic expectations was a continuous theme throughout the study as five more participants shared some form of systematic pressure. P5 stated, "I would say during the transition period, a lot of late nights. I wasn't expecting to have to do home visits late at night. The workload was more than I could have ever imagined," while P3 expressed, "When I first started, I had a lot of cases and just trying to navigate. Like how to prioritize all the cases and not only like cases, like you got emails, you got to be out in the field." Furthermore, P4 explained, "There's a lot of caseload and workload."

Another participant expressed concerns that supervisors were unable to accompany them in the field or provide consistent availability, not because they weren't willing, but because of structural demands within the organization. For instance, P7 explained that supervisors could better support newly graduated social workers by, "Giving more of their time…They need to go out on cases with them more when they're first getting in the field." P2 also reported that newly graduated social workers should, "Maybe have more one-on-one with the supervisor in the field versus just always in the office, going through paperwork," and that her supervisor was "Kind of restricted, and only had so much that she could do." P2 shared,

> I definitely think they need a pay increase…The pay was very minimum. I think they made less than teachers when I started, especially for the hours you have, and all the wear and tear they want you to put on your vehicle.

Additionally, participants referenced systematic realities such as low pay and negative stigma. P1 reported "A lot of social workers are overworked and underpaid. And that's just something that everybody knows." Lastly, participants highlighted the external pressures and widespread misconceptions created by society. P6 expressed, "So one challenge with families is the stigma, that they think we're only there to take their children," while P3 dislosed, "The system has a bad rap since the start because there was a lot of practices that shouldn't have been done." Although systematic issues shaped much of the participants' stress, many expressed a lack of practical preparation, which leads to the next theme, Training Gap.

Theme 5: Training Gap

"I don't think they fully understand how much we have to do." This reflection by P5 captured a common concern amongst participants; which is that the training they received did not fully reflect the realities of the field of CPS, specifically the demands of late-night visits, high caseloads and unpredictable schedules. P5 further explained her position by sharing,

> And I feel like they believe that in the education portion and at the actual job, they don't really expect us to do late night visits… So, if I have to do three visits and all of them have to be after 5 o'clock, a lot of times I might not get home until 9 p.m.

Furthermore, P2 expressed, "whether you're shadowing or not, at 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, you have to get up and leave your house with your family to go to somebody else's house, which is an unknown," while P3 reported, "You will have clients calling you 24/7." Additionally, many participants shared that the amount of training they received when they transitioned into the field was not sufficient based on the timeframe they received their first caseload, and the number of cases received. For example, P6 stated,

> I believe additional training times going in. Unfortunately, many times the caseloads are left vacant and sometimes those timeframes are longer than needed…So it's a disadvantage going in and not having full training before being given a caseload that is top heavy… It definitely could have used more training.

P5 expressed that she received, “a week or two of training.” P3 shared that she received, “2 ½ months of training,” while P4 disclosed, “It was just like some 3- day training.” P2 communicated that she received 4 months of training. While many participants expressed a lack hands-on training, one shared that she felt adequately trained for the demands of their role. P1 expressed, “I felt like they did. They provided a lot of training.”

P7 credited her coursework with providing essential knowledge, but still emphasized the need for direct experience by sharing, “My education prepared me as far as the paperwork and book knowledge of social work, but you really don’t get the full experience of being a social worker until you in the field. In addition, participants expressed concerns regarding the unrealistic nature of their training, and the need for structured and mandatory internship experiences outside of the classroom. For instance, P5 stated, “You do have to go to training when you start, but when it comes to the cases, you just kind of shadow someone.”

P2 added to this theme by sharing, “I feel like whenever they’re doing internship, maybe definitely more hands on,” while P4 stated, “We used to go for like internships, but…they weren’t really like in a real case scenario. So I was kind of surprised when I got into my role.” Although several participants described their hands on training as insufficient, a smaller group shared that their educational background was sufficient in providing a solid foundation prior to entering the field. P1 expressed,

> It prepared me by really just giving me the knowledge that I needed regarding social work, like when it comes to learning the different developmental stages,

different mental health diagnosis, and just giving that knowledge of how to meet the clients where they're at.

P6 also shared, "My education allowed me to learn about the different dynamics of Child Protective Services and it allowed me to dispel some of the myths about Child Protective Services." Although some participants felt supported by their training and education, it was a consensus that no amount of preparation- academic or practical- could really prepare you for the emotional weight brought on by the weight of the work.

Summary

The findings of this study revealed five themes that reflected the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of CPS. The themes included mentorship, role transition, supervisory support, systematic pressure, and training gap. Data collected for this study provided various perspectives and offered a rich and complex view of what it means to work in such a demanding field. In the final chapter, I present a thorough discussion of my findings, highlighted the limitations of the study, made recommendations based on the data, and offered implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Transitioning to the field of CPS can be challenging due to the complexities of being tasked with several unfamiliar job duties in an unfamiliar territory. Although some research had been conducted on the field of CPS, there was a disconnect between the education that newly graduated social workers received and the implementation of practical skills on the job. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned into the field of CPS. I sought to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition into the field of child protective services? A qualitative phenomenological design was used to answer this question.

Although participants expressed several common experiences, each narrative revealed distinct challenges and insights that formed their early professional journeys in CPS. Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect data and explore the lived experiences of this phenomenon. Additionally, the study was guided by the P-E-fit theory. In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings of the study, discuss the limitations of the study, offer recommendations, and explain implications for social change. The findings of this study may inform educational practices and support efforts to ease the transition for newly graduated social workers entering the field of CPS.

Interpretation of the Findings

Child abuse and neglect present a grave concern in the United States, impacting thousands of children yearly (National Children's Alliance, 2025). The current study provided insights into the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers

transitioning into the field of CPS. The findings confirmed the challenges associated with transitioning from academia into the professional workplace, particularly applying theoretical knowledge to the complex realities of CPS.

Moreover, study outcomes confirmed numerous well-documented challenges faced by newly graduated social workers, specifically high caseloads, workplace hostility, low compensation, and limited organizational support (Grant et al., 2022; Tang & Li, 2021). Current study findings align with existing literature and further illustrate the complexities of transitioning from academia to practice, while also introducing implications that may contribute to future comparative studies. The study produced five overarching themes, which offer rich insight into the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers navigating the field of CPS.

Theme 1: Mentorship

Insights gathered from participants emphasized mentorship not only as formal supervisory guidance, but as day-to-day interpersonal support. Several noted how being able to discuss cases before meeting with families, receiving practical advice on how to handle difficult situations, and shadowing a seasoned co-worker allowed them to build more confidence and avoid feeling isolated when it is time to make difficult decisions. This mirrors research from Bogo and Dill (2008), who found that successful mentorship can mitigate feelings of burnout and promote job satisfaction amongst child welfare workers, a finding substantiated by more recent studies (Nilsen et al., 2025; Pharris et al., 2022). One participant shared, “It absolutely made the job easier because you knew that even in the decision-making process, you also had someone else there to guide you.” This

direct support from mentors showed to be a crucial aspect in navigating ambiguous and emotionally charged interactions.

Participants in this study consistently described mentorship as a critical support factor needed to address the emotional and operational demands of CPS. Extended literature underscored the importance of professional guidance from experienced mentors during the early stages of a newly graduated social worker's career (Collins-Camargo and Royse, 2010). This notion is further supported by Glassburn (2020) who reported that supervisory support and guided mentorship substantially contributes to job satisfaction, emotional resilience, and self-efficacy during the transition from academic preparation to professional application. The consistency between both participant responses and prior research reinforces the need for structured mentorship programs in CPS settings to support practice readiness and retention.

Additionally, participants frequently shared that mentorship was a stabilizing factor that aided in alleviating stress of high caseloads, emotional burdens, and lack of job/field readiness. Furthermore, mentorship extended beyond the professional realm of instruction. Such reflections confirm prior literature which stated that mentorship can be a buffer against isolation, and a catalyst for developing skill in CPS (Bogo & Wayne, 2013; Kanno & Koeske, 2010). Experiences shared in this study highlighted the value of supervisors and colleagues acknowledging their personal growth and emotional struggles in and out of the field. This level of relational mentorship facilitated a strong sense of affirmation and belonging for newly graduated social workers, as one participant highlighted, "Just being there, talking to us, showing us different tools." This introduced

new insight by illustrating how effective mentorship played a critical role in helping newly graduated social workers navigate the emotional demands of working in CPS.

Theme 2: Role Transition

A recurring topic in participant interviews confirmed that the transition from academia to field work in CPS was often met with significant role adjustment challenges. Participants suggested a vast contrast between what they expected based on their education, and the unpredictable, emotional, and high stress environment they were met with during the transition. This theme reinforced existing literature by showing that newly graduated social workers need extensive hands-on training, extensive social service training, and hands-on field experience (Wright, 2023). There was a consensus amongst participants that they were not adequately prepared for the realities of the field, and majority of their learning came through direct experience once they transitioned over. One participant noted, “You have to learn it once you really get in the field and start experiencing it.”

This further supported Saddiq and Iqbal (2019) who argued that social workers entering the field participate in experiential learning out of necessity, due to lack of preparedness. The findings from this study also aligned with prior research from Tham and Lynch (2014) who emphasized that newly graduated social workers would benefit from increased practical training during academia to better prepare them for the transition into the field. Insights gathered from participant interviews in this study often expressed internalized pressure to “figure it out on their own.” One participant expressed, “My education prepared me as far as the paperwork and book knowledge of social work, but

you really don't get the full experience of being a social worker until you on the field working with the family and children."

These challenges were consistent with the P-E-fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998), which posits that dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout occurs when there is a lack of fit between the worker's capabilities and the demands of the environment. Through examining participants' perspectives, the findings extend the knowledge by showcasing how a lack of real-world preparation disrupts newly graduated social worker's professional identify. This is supported by Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2022) who indicated that significant gaps and tension between academic instruction and professional practice result in new graduates feeling low levels of readiness for professional expectations.

Furthermore, Biggerstaff et al., (1998) posited that one cannot be competent in a profession without actual job performance, while Kane (1994, p. 139) further expressed that readiness for practice occurs when a social worker has been prepared for the field prior to entering it. Moreover, the theme of role transition" substantiated the urgent need of bridging the gap between research and practice. Findings further reinforced existing concerns raised by Glassburn (2020), including inadequate field preparation, limited real-life training opportunities, insufficient support structures, and a lack of practice-informed curriculum. Building on these concerns, this research furnished a deeper understanding of how this gap has a direct effect on emotional well-being, retention, and creating positive professional identities in CPS.

Theme 3: Supervisory Support

Insights gathered through this research study confirmed the vital role supervisory support plays in shaping the early professional experiences of newly graduated social workers in CPS. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of having supervisors who were accessible, experienced, emotionally present, and provided case-specific guidance. These insights aligned with Saltiel (2016) who proposed that supervision should go beyond administrative oversight and include reflective, emotional, and hands-on support, specifically for those new to the field. This also reinforced literature by Glassburn (2020), whose findings suggested that this level of support is critical in fostering emotional resilience and professional self-efficacy among newly graduated social workers. Similarly, Jacquet et al., (2008) and Zinn (2015) expressed that there is an increased level of job satisfaction within the work environment when there is a positive relationship between employees and their supervisors. Additionally, this positive relationship is shown to foster professional development and mitigate feelings of uncertainty and overwhelmingness (Saltiel, 2016).

The findings of this study also supported the view of Collins-Camargo and Royce (2010) that effective supervision builds confidence and professional identity in high stress environments such as CPS. Participants in this study who experienced consistent check-ins, supportive case reviews, and emotional validation from their supervisors felt emotional reassurance and less overwhelmed. This demonstrates the findings of Quinn et al., (2019), who postulated that newly graduated social workers thrive when they feel their supervisors care and is invested in their long-term success.

However, not all participants experienced this level of support. For example, one participant expressed, “I had a supervisor that was, she strictly cared about the data. She didn’t care whether or not I needed help with going on my visits.” This reflected a task-oriented supervisory approach that neglected the emotional and supportive needs of the social worker. Other participants shared how supervisor relationships were more nuanced and required open communication even during times of disagreements. One participant revealed, “Sometimes you don’t see eye to eye with your supervisor on making decisions that you feel is best for the family…so you might have to come back and say, “Hey, I don’t agree with you on this.” Let’s sit down and discuss it.” This quote illustrates how supportive supervision can involve conflict, yet respective dialogue can be a source of growth and alignment in decision making, increasing confidence in both roles. The contrast between helpful and unhelpful supervisory support demonstrated that supervisory support does not only protect against emotional distress, but is also instrumental in cultivating professional competence and long-term retention in CPS. Overall, supervisory support emerged as a pivotal factor that could intensify the emotional and professional demands of the field or buffer against them.

Theme 4: Systematic Pressure

Evidence from this research study confirmed existing literature by emphasizing the systematic pressures rooted within the structures of CPS (Jacquet et al., 2008; Zinn, 2015; Quinn et al., 2019). Participants expressed tenacious organizational stressors such as limited resources, heavy caseloads and administrative demands that hindered their ability to successfully perform their job duties in the field. This factor was a consensus

amongst all participants, many of whom entered the role of newly graduated social worker unprepared for the intense workload and unachievable institutional expectations. One participant noted, “There’s a lot of caseload and workload,’ while another shared, “I wasn’t expecting to have to do home visits late at night. The workload was more that I could have ever imagined.”

These findings are consistent with Quinn et al., (2019) who reported that social workers consistently experience dissonance between the systematic policies brought on by the field and the practical realities of the job. The reported pressure of working in a stressful environment with insufficient pay, inadequate staffing, and high accountability reinforced challenges faced by newly graduated social workers. This aligned with Zinn (2015), who postulated that systematic entities often lacked the flexibility needed to accommodate newly graduated social workers. Such experiences can be conceptualized through the lens of P-E fit theory, which underscores the importance of alignment between an individual’s skills, values, and needs, and the resources or demands of the work environment, which when misaligned, can cause dissatisfaction and psychological strain (Jung et al.,2024; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). From this perspective, the dissonance between the participant’s commitment to helping others and the systematic constraints instituted by social service agencies reflect a quintessential illustration of poor person to environment fit.

Additionally, these pressures were not isolated incidents but reflected a shared systematic strain presented by all participants. One participant stated, “When I first started, I had a lot of cases and just trying to navigate. Like how to prioritize all the cases

and not only like cases, you got emails, you got to be out in the field," underscoring the amplitude of the workload. Another participant spotlighted financial strain as a contributing factor, sharing, "I definitely think they need a pay increase. The pay was very minimum." These shared experiences support the interpretation that organizational structure, unrealistic expectations and minimal compensation create conditions that threaten long-term retention and challenge individual resilience.

Lastly, in addition to structural challenges, participants often reported that systematic expectations frequently conflicted with their moral values and professional judgment. Tension was frequently brought on by the rigidity of policy enforcement and adhering to performance metrics due to participants deciphering what was in the best interest of the families and what the agency required. One participant noted,

> One thing I learned is sometimes the door is revolving in this particular area. And so, the stressors going in and being assigned huge caseloads and some incomplete and being the one to step in and take over and to be able to do that as well as training and learning the job itself.

This shared disconnect between human-centered nature of social work exemplified participant's stress and frustration. Such experiences reflected He et al., (2020) and Jacquet et al., (2008), who underscored that the organizational culture in CPS may contribute to moral distress when professionals are unable to adhere to their ethical standards. The findings from this study further emphasized the need for systematic refinement that considers the well-being of both newly graduated social workers and the

vulnerable populations they service, particularly during the transition period into CPS when resilience is being built.

Theme 5: Training Gap

The data revealed a congruent concern regarding gaps in professional training among newly graduated social workers. While some participants expressed receiving adequate training, many shared that training was inconsistent, insufficient, and lacked real-world application. These findings were consistent with Glassburn (2018) who accentuated that newly graduated social workers often experienced a lack of preparedness when transitioning into the field of CPS. The P-E fit theory (Edwards et. al., 1998) provides a useful prospective on interpreting such findings by sharing that when there is a mismatch between a worker's capabilities and the demands of the work environment, stress and burnout may arise.

The study further highlighted how insufficient or fragmented training led to challenges in adapting to the professional expectations of CPS. One participant shared, "I don't think they fully understand how much we have to do,' which highlighted the current disconnect between education and practice. Furthermore, participants expressed how training was varied and inconsistent across the board. One participant described receiving 3 days of training, another recalled 4-months of training, while others noted receiving 2 ½ months of training or, "a week or 2" of training before being tossed into the field and assigned a full caseload.

These findings illustrate a systematic issue concerning onboarding practices. Many participants shared that the amount of training they received when they transitioned

into the field was not sufficient based on the timeframe they received their first caseload, which underscored the overwhelming nature of the early stages of newly graduated social workers. Wright (2023) echoed this concern by recognizing that inadequate onboarding and inconsistent training are key factors in professional frustration. Battaglia (2020) further emphasized the need for structured training in enhancing workplace competence and reducing attrition early on. Comprehensively, the findings of this study extend existing literature by accentuating how the quality, length, and timeliness of training influence newly graduated social workers. A lack of sufficient preparation causes new workers to descend into emotionally demanding situations without the essential tools, intensifying the impact of the training gap. This mismatch between newly graduated social workers preparation and role expectations aligns with the central beliefs of the P E-fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998), which emphasizes the consequences of incongruence between new workers and their roles, and how this can lead to a reduction in confidence, emotional distress, and challenges with role adaptation.

Limitations of the Study

While the results of the study make a significant contribution to understanding the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers in CPS, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size included seven participants who identified as African American women living in the southeastern United States, and although Guest et al., (2006) noted that qualitative data saturation is reached with six to 12 participants, this homogeneity in geographic location and demographics could limit the transferability of the results to overall population. Furthermore, social workers in differing regions, with

diverse cultural backgrounds or gender variations, may have individual experiences that were not captured in this study.

Moreover, since the study relied on self-reported experiences by means of one-on-one interviews, there is a possibility for personal bias or memory suppression. The voluntary nature of participation may have attracted individuals more willing to engage in introspection or more receptive to contributing to academic research. Creswell and Poth (2018) accentuated that qualitative research relying on participant narration is subject to individual exposition and contextual limitations. Although limitations exist, this study contributes significantly to the broader understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by newly graduated social workers and identifies actionable areas for institutional and curricular reform.

Recommendations

This field presents numerous avenues for future research, specifically in addressing the evolving challenges experienced by newly graduated social workers in CPS. These challenges warrant further investigation across academic institutions, agency level practice, and systematic policy reform. Social worker educational programs should improve their curricula by embedding firsthand learning opportunities and realistic hands- on experience. Although participants in this study recognized the value of their academic preparation, many stressed a lack of practical preparedness when transitioning to their role in CPS, thus leading to a gap between classroom education and field practice when entering CPS roles (Glassburn, 2020).

To address this preparation gap, practical recommendations grounded in P-E-fit theory are proposed. This concept emphasizes the significance of alignment between an individual's abilities and the environmental demands of their role (Kristof et al., 2005). Since misalignment can lead to burnout, attrition or discontent- as expressed by participants' during this study, multiple actionable solutions are proposed. The first recommendation is enhancing pre-service training curriculums. Such programs could consist of implementing field-informed instruction into social work syllabi to strengthen practical preparation and reduce the division between the classroom and the field. A second strategy involves organizations enforcing more structured onboarding, consisting of peer mentorship, staggered caseloads, and times of transition to improve alignment between early competency and field obligations. Next, assigning newly graduated social workers to experienced mentors will increase field-based mentorship initiatives. This addition may open the door for emotional support, ongoing assistance, and opportunities for professional development during the transitional period. Another involves strengthening university-agency partnerships.

Enhancing partnerships between academic programs and child protective agencies may align instructional content with the real-world environment, which may lead to the improvement of environmental predictability and training expectations. Finally, introducing a caseload allocation model in which newly graduated social workers oversee simplified cases early on, may support earlier success and create manageable learning curves. Building upon these recommendations, academia should incorporate trauma-informed education, interactive training simulations, and mock investigations that imitate

CPS complexities. Furthermore, based on the research collected in this study and the findings from Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2022) which stated that intrusive field education must be applied to improve readiness, it is recommended that academic institutions move beyond theory and equip learners with the tools required to manage the emotional demands and intricate caseloads that surface early in their training.

Additionally, child advocacy organizations must give precedence to comprehensive onboarding processes that incorporate unwavering mentorship, structured supervision, and mental and emotional wellness support. Participants described inconsistent levels of guidance and highlighted how unpredictable supervision and/or lack of clarity exacerbated their stress. Jacquet et al., (2008) discovered that supportive supervision is crucial for social worker retention and professional development. Agencies must establish formalized mentorship programs, routine reflective meetings, and reachable wellness resources to minimize emotional exhaustion. Bogo and Dill (2008) suggested developing environments that encourage open communication among leadership and staff to address contention and moral distress proactively. Organizations that foster wellness and professional development could experience increased retention and worker contentment. Furthermore, from a strategic view, increased funding and political advocacy are needed to advocate training, compensation and mental health care for CPS workers.

Multiple participants reported excessive caseloads and low pay, which aligned with systematic concerns identified by Saltiel (2016) and Zinn (2015). Policies that encourage manageable caseloads, equitable payment, and trauma- informed practice

standards are crucial for reducing burnout and enhancing quality of service. Lastly, research should explore various demographic and geographic sampling to assess how location, gender, and race influence the transition into CPS. As suggested by Guest et al., (2006) saturation is commonly reached with small qualitative sampling however, broader studies may yield nuanced insights that inform nationwide practice models. Multi-sectoral collaboration between practitioners, policymakers and educators is vital in addressing the emerging needs of newly graduated social workers in CPS.

Implications for Social Change

The results from this research spotlight significant avenues for social change, particularly within the field of child protective services (CPS). By concentrating on the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transition from education to practice, this research advances voices that are frequently overlooked during a decision-making process. Such narratives not only reveal the emotional and structural difficulties associated with entering CPS, but also expound upon the resilience and commitment these professionals bring to a field charged with protecting vulnerable children and families. Centering these firsthand accounts contributes to a comprehensive understanding of what is needed to promote a more sustainable, supportive, and impartial professional environment.

A pivotal implication lies in reexamining how academia prepares students for the intricacies of CPS work. Participants in this study spoke openly about the disconnect between what was learned in the academic world and what they faced in the field. These experiences underscore the absence of experiential learning, trauma-informed instruction,

and scenario-based training. The discrepancies between academic knowledge and fieldwork expectations highlight a need for more immersive and practical preparatory experiences. Enhancing collegiate-agency partnerships may also provide students earlier exposure to field dynamics and aid in mitigating role shock during the transition upon graduation (Ayala et al., 2018). This is particularly crucial for CPS workers who will be servicing communities that are marginalized, under supported, and profoundly impacted by generational trauma.

Methodologically, this study's implications demonstrated the significance of a qualitative phenomenological approach in understanding newly graduated social worker's experiences in high- stress environments. Utilizing in-depth interviews permitted rich, detailed accounts that could have been overlooked in quantitative data alone. Emerging scholars may extend or replicate this methodology to other demanding human services roles. Moreover, empirical implications from this study added to an evolving body of research that documents the problems identified by social workers entering the field. The identification of themes including mentorship, role transition, supervisory support, systematic pressure, and training gap offers actionable documentation for educators, real-world mentors, field coordinators, and agency leaders to develop strategies that improve readiness and strengthen employee retention.

Collectively, these implications support the foundational idea of P-E fit theory, implicating that when individual expectations, values, and competencies misalign with the demands of an organization, job dissatisfaction is exacerbated. Viewed in relation to prior literature, these results align with Cooley & Campbell (2013) and Quinn et al.,

(2019) who revealed how systematic pressures involving limited support and heavy caseloads created discordance between professional identity and organizational structure. Furthermore, these findings enhance the application of the P-E-fit theory by validating how an individual-organizational misfit in the field of CPS encompasses more than operational or task-based strain. Conversely, misalignment generally occurs as a result of ethical conflict, emotional labor, and a perceived discordance between personal values and organizational directives.

Such nuances support Bae et al.'s (2020) assertion that misalignment in the environment of human services is interrelated with value-based strain and institutional mandates. Likewise, Grant et al., (2022) suggested that newly graduated social workers oftentimes struggled with balancing their professional values with the rigorous expectations of the field of CPS, resulting in emotional exhaustion and reevaluating their professional identity. By underscoring the emotional and ethical facets of fit, this study advances the P-E fit theory by contributing to a more holistic recognition of how misalignment is situated within emotionally intensive helping professionals such as social work. Another implication revolves around the importance of emotional and supervisory support in the field of CPS. During participant reflection, many emphasized how the presence or absence of meaningful supervision molded their early experiences. CPS agencies have an opportunity to generate perpetual change by prioritizing effective mentorship, organizational wellbeing, and psychological security. Such supports should be observed not as optional refinements, but as essential components in a field as exacting as CPS. Research asserts that mental health programs and supervisory support

initiatives are directly linked to increased retention and job satisfaction (Kim and Stoner, 2008), each of which are essential for the stability of services given to children and families.

Moreover, systematic issues such as high caseloads, inadequate compensation, and societal stigma emerged as crucial stressors. Participants consistently expressed fatigue and frustration over these unyielding challenges, which have true implications for retention and morale. Tackling these issues through policy reform and community advocacy could transform what it means to be a social worker in CPS. When the organization supports its staff professionally, emotionally, and financially – those employees are better equipped to assists families in crisis. Furthermore, such changes would directly benefit the communities most affected by CPS intervention, majority of which are economically disadvantaged or racially minoritized. Ultimately, this study calls for change that address both systematic frameworks and the personal realities of practice. If we are able to retain social compassionate and proficient social workers, we must not only train them better but also provide intentional care. Investing in the wellbeing, preparedness, and support of newly graduated social workers serves as more than just a strategic initiative in the workplace, it serves as a direct contribution to the stability and health of vulnerable families and children.

Conclusion

Guided by the P-E- fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998), this study provided a rich understanding of the lived experiences of newly graduated social workers as they transitioned from education into the field of CPS. Through elevating participant voices,

the findings expanded prior research by Hussian et al., (2014) and Wilkins and Antonopoukou (2019), who underscored the dissonance between scholarly training and the realities of working in the field. This study also accentuated the significant educational, structural, and emotional challenges faced by newly graduated social workers, particularly within environments characterized by excessive caseloads, limited preparation, and systematic nuisances. Moreover, this study provided a richer understanding of the transitory misalignment between academic instruction and the practical demands associated with CPS, and how this misalignment can negatively affect a newly graduated social worker's performance, mental health, and retention.

Additionally, these findings reinforced the urgency of resolving structural challenges that inhibit an already vulnerable organization from thriving. The emotional toll verbalized by participants revealed that vicarious trauma and burnout are not secondary implications but instantaneous realities that shape how newly graduated social workers engage with children, families, and the system. As suggested by Saitadze and Dvalishvili (2022), inadequate preparedness can weaken confidence and resilience, specifically in environments where decision making bear higher moral and legal consequences. By means of using these firsthand accounts, this study not only validated the need for enhanced transitional support but also revealed opportunities for universities and organizations to collaboratively develop more sustainable models of professional development in CPS. This includes providing an interactive training environment, exclusive mentorship programs, enhanced wellness initiatives, and comprehensive

supervision strategies- all of which unfolded as practical recommendations grounded in participant narrations and existing literature.

In summary, the study contributes to a richer understanding of the explicit realities faced by newly graduated social workers entering CPS, not just as an accumulation of challenges, but as deep human experiences molded by emotion, environment, and progressing identity. As a researcher and former CPS worker, I am reminded that hidden behind every policy and practice is a human being who is often unheard, overwhelmed, and deeply passionate about protecting others. By centering their voices, this study will not only illuminate change- it acknowledges the resilience of newly graduated social workers and petitions stakeholders to heed these voices, interpret them through an empathetic objective, and respond with a sense of moral urgency. This is not merely research; it is a call to action rooted in care.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How did you view your role in child protective services before entering the field?
2. How did your education prepare you for this transition?
3. What stressors did you experience while transitioning to the field?
4. In what ways do you believe that these stressors could have been avoided?
5. Did the agency provide any training to prepare you for your first case?
6. Please describe any challenges you faced when interacting with families in the field?
7. What resources if any did you use to help eliminate those challenges?
8. What resources did you use to help promote positive engagement when interacting with families?
9. What kind of support did you receive from your supervisor?
10. How did your experience(s) working with the supervisor(s) make your job easier or harder?
11. How can supervisors better support newly graduated social workers?
12. What educational components do you believe needs to be added to better prepare newly graduated social workers to work in the field?
13. What factors contributed to your success as a newly graduated social worker?
14. How would you encourage a newly graduated social worker who is about to enter the field of child protective services?
15. Please share any final thoughts.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? (Please select from an age range below)
    - 18-24
    - 25-34
    - 35-44
    - 45-54
    - 55-64
    - 65 years or older

2. What is your ethnicity? (Please select from the list of options below).
    - Black or African American
    - White
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - Native American or American Indian
    - Asian/ Pacific Islander
    - Other

3. What is your gender?
    - Cisgender Male
    - Cisgender Female
    - Transgender
    - Other
    - Prefer not to say

4. What is your current city and state?

5. What is the highest social worker degree you poses?

    - Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)
    - Master of Social Work (MSW)
    - Doctorate in social work (DSW)

6. What child protective services agency did you/do you work for?

7. Since you graduated from your last university, how many years have you worked for child protective services?