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**THE ROLE OF THE FIELD PRACTICUM IN SOCIAL WORKERS' PREPAREDNESS
TO ENTER THE WORKFORCE**

A Dissertation in
Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The theoretical frameworks used to analyze data in this study were experiential learning theory, communities of practice, and critical feminist theory. The study focused on the experiences of recently graduated, bachelor's level social workers during their field practicum and explored factors that promoted or prohibited students' learning. Additionally, this study explored issues that exist within academic social work and multiple social work agencies related to gender.

Ten participants, who graduated from a bachelor's-level social work program within the past five years, volunteered to participate in this study. Data consisted primarily of in-depth participant interviews and analysis of related documents from the field practicum experience and universities the participants attended. Data was manually analyzed thematically. The findings of the study are grouped into four primary areas: (a) the need for adequate preparation for selection and beginning the field practicum; (b) the importance of learning through direct practice; (c) the influential role of coworkers; and (d) the limited gender consciousness within social work academia and the social work field. The findings suggest a need to incorporate critical feminist perspectives in social work education, research, and discourse, provision of appropriate direct learning opportunities during the field practicum, and recognition of the impact of coworkers and supervisors on student learning.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION	1
Contextualizing the Problem	3
Social Work Field Education as Adult Education	3
Effectiveness of Field Education	5
The Social Work Academic Gender and Pay Gap	6
Feminism, Critical Feminist Theory, and Social Work	7
Social Work and Adult Education	9
Gaps in the Literature	10
Problem Statement, Study Purpose, and Research Questions	10
Theoretical Frameworks	11
Experiential Learning	12
Communities of Practice	13
Critical Feminist Theory	15
Overview of Research Design	17
Significance of the Study	19
Assumptions, Limitations, and Strengths	20
Assumptions	20
Limitations	21
Strengths	22
Definition of Terms	23
Conclusion	24
CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW	26
The Field Practicum Experience	26
Overview of the Field Practicum	26
Overview of Social Work Education	27
Empirical Literature Related to Social Work Field Practice	29
Effectiveness	30
Student preparedness for the workforce	31
Theoretical Perspectives	33
Experiential Learning Theory	34
Empirical Literature Related to Experiential Learning and Social Work Education	38
Experiential learning in the classroom	38
Experiential learning during the field practicum	39
International social work and experiential learning	40
Communities of Practice	42
Empirical Literature Related to Communities of Practice and Social Work Education	46
Social work education	46
Social work profession	47
Professional Socialization	48
Gender in Higher Education	50
Gender in Social Work Academia	51
Gender in the Social Work Workplace	53

Critical Feminist Theory	55
Critical theory	55
Feminist theory and feminism	58
Critical feminist theory	60
Critical Feminist Theory in Adult Education	63
Intersections of Critical, Feminist, and Critical Feminist Theories in Social Work	65
Critical and feminist theories in social work	66
Critical feminist theory and social work	70
Undergraduate Social Work Students and Adult Education	74
The Undergraduate Student Adult	75
Bio-social factors of adulthood	76
Neurological factors of adulthood	77
Trend of older undergraduate students	78
Conclusion	79
CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY	83
The Qualitative Research Paradigm	83
Characteristics of Qualitative Research	84
Qualitative Research Approaches	85
Research Design	86
Basic Interpretive Design	86
Background of the Researcher	88
Participant Selection	90
Data Collection Procedure and Methods	95
Interviews	96
Documents and Artifacts	97
Informed Consent	98
Data Analysis	99
Theoretical Framework as it Relates to Research Design	99
Data Coding	101
Themes	101
Issues of Dependability and Verification	102
Credibility	102
Data triangulation	103
Member checks	103
Dependability and Confirmability	104
Conclusion	105
CHAPTER FOUR. FINDINGS	106
Data Display	108
Preparation for the Field Practicum	110
Agency Selection Process	112
Time to choose	112
University-driven placements	114
Accommodating student needs	115
Agency Orientation Process	117
Learning Through Direct Practice	120

Recognizing the Nontraditional Student Experience	121
Credit for life experience	122
Internship adjustments	123
Procuring Learning Experiences	126
Importance of having time in the field	131
Preferring to observe processes from beginning to end ...	132
Managing an autonomous caseload	134
Influential Role of Coworkers	137
Supportive Coworker Learning Community	138
Wide Range of Clinical Approaches	140
Supervisor Interactions and Support	142
Support for independence	143
Availability for guidance	144
High-level and non-social work supervisor disconnects	146
Limited Gender Consciousness	149
Program Contributions to Gender Consciousness	149
Recognizing marginalization in society	150
Limitations on gender marginalization discourse	152
Social work faculty demographics	154
Unseen Gender Disparities during Field Placements	156
Conclusion	161
CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS	162
Findings Summary in Light of the Theoretical Framework	162
A Need for Adequate Preparation to Select and Begin the Field Practicum	163
The Importance of Learning Through Direct Practice	164
The Influential Role of Coworkers	166
Limited Gender Consciousness in Social Work Academia and the Field	168
Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education and Practice	170
Thorough Preparation for the Field Practicum	171
Consider the Needs of Nontraditional Undergraduate Social Work Students	171
.....	171
Provide Numerous and Appropriate Direct Practice Field Experiences	173
Recognize the Important Roles of Coworkers and Supervisors	175
Address Gender Disparities in Social Work Academia and Practice	179
Expand Students' Critical Perspectives on Gender	180
Implications and Recommendations for Adult Education	182
Implications for Theory and Future Research	184
Implications for Theory	184
Limitations of this Study	188
Suggestions for Further Research	189
Final Reflections	191
Appendix: Interview Guides	194
References	196

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Information

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“I bet your father had a lot of difficulties with you when you lived at home.” Those were the parting words from my master’s level social work field practicum supervisor on my last afternoon at the hospital. He had just finished my final student evaluation and, after a yearlong power struggle, I was about to leave forever and graduate. At the beginning of the year, I had made it clear that I had goals to do psychotherapy on my own, run groups, and be innovative with our patients with new evidence-based practices to expand my social work skills. My supervisor literally laughed at these ambitions. I was interning at the hospital with a fellow student, who happened to be male, and as the year went on and opportunities arose to take the lead on projects or to run groups, they were always given to my male student counterpart. He stated that he felt unprepared and uninterested in taking on these projects, but they were forced upon him by our supervisor. My co-intern would state how uncomfortable he was that our supervisor treated us so differently. Despite my persistent asking for new opportunities, I was not given any by our supervisor, who began to avoid me altogether.

We were not the only ones who were concerned about him. There were other social workers and behavior specialists working at the hospital, who also complained about how he treated them and how they saw him treating me. Strangely, despite these vocalized issues, he remained the highest-ranking supervisor in the hospital. The hospital administrator was also male, all of the doctors were male, and the majority of supervisors were male, while all of the practitioners providing client services, such as behavior assessments, interventions, and psychotherapy, were female. Although the hospital was small and likely did not represent the gender demographics of hospital physicians elsewhere, that always struck me as strange.

Fortunately, my hard work and interest was noticed by the hospital administrator, who told my supervisor he wanted me to start taking the lead on projects and to run groups unsupervised. My supervisor did not even try to hide his disagreement and vocalized in front of me that he did not think I should have that opportunity. Sadly, many of the other employees at the hospital told me that I was just one in a long line of female students who had had the misfortune of having a field placement with this man; and, that many of them had left discouraged and possibly without the skillset they needed to enter the field because of the lack of opportunities given to them there. Fortunately, I had a very helpful bachelor's level social work field practicum, but knowing that I was not the first to encounter the issues that came to light during my master's level practicum made me hope that, although it would likely not end after me, one day, someone would be the last person to deal with this. The purpose of social work field placements is to prepare students to successfully enter the workforce (Council on Social Work Education, 2015); not to discourage and disadvantage them by providing an ineffective or overtly sexist field practicum environment.

In light of my experience, and after hearing about others similar to mine, the purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide foundational background information and an overview of my study by briefly discussing the theoretical frameworks, providing an outline of the research methodology, defining important terms, and discussing assumptions, limitations, and strengths of the study.

Contextualizing the Problem

A field practicum experience, sometimes known as an internship, is often a required part of the curriculum for many fields of practice. For example, students are required to practice teaching in the field before they become certified teachers. This is especially true in clinical education curricula, including in the social sciences and medicine. Emphasis is placed on student learners having direct practice experience and hands-on learning to solidify the knowledge they gain from their coursework. This emphasis often results in a requirement for students to complete a field practicum or internship experience in the workplace, during the school year or over the summer, for classroom credit. The field of social work relies heavily on a mandatory direct practice experience to solidify students' years of classroom education and book knowledge and allow them to apply what they have learned.

Social Work Field Education as Adult Education

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the accrediting body that determines what requirements students must complete prior to graduation to ensure competent social work graduates (CSWE, 2017). To meet the competencies, CSWE-accredited schools are required to have students complete a field practicum during the fourth year of their program with a minimum of 400 practice hours prior to graduation (CSWE, 2016). CSWE explains the rationale for this requirement:

Signature pedagogies are elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline—to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity. Field education is the signature pedagogy for social work. (CSWE, 2015, p. 12)

Students usually complete these hours at a local social services agency during the fourth or final year of their undergraduate degree. Ideally, this would be an agency of their choosing, depending on their area of interest and agency availability. These agencies must have a supervisor available with appropriate credentials who can supervise the student. Additionally, most agencies and students sign a learning contract detailing the agency's obligation to provide tasks relevant to meeting the student's learning needs, as well as the student's obligations to complete the assigned tasks. This contract attempts to ensure that the students' learning tasks are appropriately aligned with the competencies they must learn prior to graduation.

This emphasis on field education reveals an assumption about education held by CSWE: experiential, hands-on learning is an important component for becoming a qualified, practicing professional. This method of learning in clinical fields draws on experiential learning models from theorists, such as Kolb (as cited by Merriam & Bierema, 2014), who highlights the importance of concrete experiences and reflection on those experiences as keys to learning. Social work education requires students to spend time in the field with other professionals, so that they can learn how to put their textbook knowledge to use in the workplace. The professionals within the workplace develop what is typically referred to in adult education as a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), which could be made of up different types of working professionals at that agency, or it may be just the professional social workers that get together for meetings, lunch, or at other informal gatherings. Students' participation in hands-on experiences and working within communities of practice provide them with invaluable insight regarding how to become a social work professional, how to practice skills they have learned in the classroom, and the formal and informal rules in the workplace.

The same concept applies to social work students. Edmonds-Cady and Sosulski (2010) evaluated their social work students' participation in professional communities of practice and noted,

As they become involved as equal members of a team that includes the instructor, their student colleagues, and professional relationships that they seek out, students learn to reflect on their experiences, synthesize different kinds of information, effectively evaluate situations, and make difficult decisions. (p. 46)

Communities of practice and experiential learning opportunities teach newcomers to a field how to be a professional in the workplace and how to complete related tasks in the field.

Effectiveness of Field Education

When evaluating the effectiveness of these field practicum experiences, much of the literature has evaluated student satisfaction with their field placements at the end of the semester (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Klein, 2015; Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Petril, Fireman, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, Wertheimer Hodas, & Taussig, 2015; Sunirose, 2013), while very little social work literature explores whether or not students feel their field practicum experience has prepared them to immediately join the workforce. Most of the studies that have been conducted report findings that promote high-quality student supervision and the students' feelings of preparedness prior to beginning the field placement as factors for students' self-rated success post-placement (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2010). None of those studies circled back to students after they were gainfully employed to determine whether they perceive their field experiences appropriately prepared them to work in the field.

Review of other bodies of literature has shown that, in other fields, such as business or psychology, when students and employers evaluate whether or not they were prepared to enter

the workforce, about half of the students did not feel as though they were prepared and half of the employers agreed with them (Borden & Rajcecki, 2000; Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). In contradiction to those findings, when social work faculty were surveyed on the same topic, they reported that the students "...grasped the lessons they had intended to learn" (Young, Lee, & Kovacs, 2016, p. 5). It seems clear that this issue needs to be explored within the social work field to ensure that students are well-equipped to start working after graduation. There could be many issues influencing social work students' success, including the availability and capability of the field instructor, the opportunities available at a particular placement, and the students' responsibilities outside of school. Unfortunately, gender may also influence social work student preparedness. This will be explored further below.

The Social Work Academic Gender and Pay Gap

Although the field of social work has always appeared to be a female-dominated profession, the majority of people holding positions of power in social work academia and the social work profession are men. In higher education, as a whole, 40% more men are given the rank of full professor than women, with over 100,000 more men than women holding a professor position (Holosko, Barner, & Allen, 2016). Carter, Smith, and Osteen (2017) studied differences in gender demographics between social work professors who held roles as associate professors and those who held full professor tenure-track positions. They found that there was a gender gap at all levels of faculty positions, showing that men held more social work faculty positions than women did. Likewise, and also within social work academia, men are advancing faster and going further than women go.

According to the 2010 and 2013 reports published by the CSWE, the gender make-up of accredited undergraduate social work programs in the United States (U.S.) has held steady: 87%

of the students are female. However, as McPhail (2004) points out, contrary to popular opinion, social work is not necessarily a predominantly female occupation. This means that while the majority of social work students participating in undergraduate field practicums and then entering the workforce are female, the majority of people these students see holding power within their schools of social work and to whom they are reporting in their field practicum agencies are men. Most tenured social work faculty, program administrators and directors, and policymakers are male (McPhail, 2004). In addition, a recent study by Holosko et al. (2016) showed that, "...females in social work made between \$3,000 and \$8,000 less than their equivalently qualified male counterparts" (p. 725). Beyond the barriers women face in simply attaining higher positions in the social work field, they continue to face unfair compensation issues, which reflects the gender marginalization that takes place in the U.S. as a whole (American Association of University Women, 2017).

Feminism, Critical Feminist Theory, and Social Work

Despite the field of social work's roots in promoting equality for all, the current field of social work is plagued by its position in the federal, state, and local governments. Funding restraints and policies and procedures that are decades, or sometimes centuries, old mean that the inequity and inequality that has existed in society persists in the rules and regulations by which social work agencies must abide. Dominelli and MacLeod (1989) discuss this issue within the social work field considering that, "social work is a state agency in a society where the state is underwritten by vested interests in maintaining deep-rooted, class-based inequalities. Therefore, it is not surprising that social workers operate to maintain this status quo in various ways" (p. 103). For example, Herz and Johanssen (2012) comment on the current standards that guide of social workers' interactions with their clients, which emphasizes individuation and fragmentation

of client situations and does not take into account the institutionalized injustices that clients may face in the workplace and society as a whole, and often places sole responsibility for change on the individual.

To combat these perpetuated issues, it is imperative that critical feminist perspectives become ingrained in social work education and social work agencies. Krumer-Nevo and Komem (2015) published a study using critical feminism as a framework for social workers to use while working with adolescent girls. They noted that the critical feminist lens is unfamiliar to social workers and that some of the discourse related to inequality and barriers is sometimes seen as counterintuitive to a strengths-based approach that focuses on the positive aspects of situations. Ideally, these perspectives are introduced to social workers during their education so they could be utilized in their future practice as professionals in the field. Many authors concur that these perspectives should be used when evaluating and assessing clients in direct social work practice (Herz & Johansson 2012; Keenan, 2004; Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015; Makinnon, 2009; Morley & MacFarlane, 2012), but it is also apparent that the entire field, and social work education itself, would benefit from new perspectives.

Critical feminist theory will be discussed in Chapter Two as a lens through which to view the continued struggles of women within the social work field, especially focusing on women working within social work academia and the workplace. It provides a framework to better understand why these injustices occur and why they are perpetuated. Although this framework has not been extensively used in the social work literature up to this point, continued exposure to this lens will, hopefully, make it a valuable contributor to understanding this phenomenon. Additionally, research and literature that seems utilize a critical feminist perspective but is not

calling it such is also examined in an attempt to provide a complete view of social work literature related to this theory.

Social Work and Adult Education

Experiential learning and communities of practice are well-known adult education learning theories (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). In addition, many adult education scholars have contributed to the fields of critical theory, feminism, and critical feminist theory (Brookfield, 2005; hooks, 2000). Adult education is more inclusive of multiple types of learning, while the field of social work focuses mainly on acquiring practitioner social work skills. However, the commonly-held values between the two fields surrounding the importance of experiential learning and communities of practice, with a need for an emphasis on critical feminist theory, make the two fields more alike than they are dissimilar. It would behoove researchers, readers, and social work professors to utilize adult education theory and learning perspectives while working with undergraduate social work students, regardless of age.

Age, as a determining factor of adulthood, influences how research with undergraduate social work students should be approached and understood, because their previous and current life experiences both enrich and inhibit their explanations and personal understanding of their field practicum. However, there are strong arguments in the literature to have undergraduate college students considered adults. Research that spans a large spectrum of topics and is focused on adult learners often establishes the age of 25 as the age of adulthood (Kasworm, 2010; Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016), while the traditional undergraduate college/university student is between the ages of 18 and 22 years old and, thus, is not usually considered an adult.

However, a number of biological, neurological, and social factors that are currently being explored make good arguments for the inclusion of those under the age of 25 to be considered

adults. This is known as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Beyond just the characteristics of individual adults, there is a trend over the past few decades of a continually increasing, nontraditional, undergraduate student demographic (Graham & Donaldson, 1999), which makes it more likely that many recently graduated undergraduates are not of traditional age. In relationship to this demographic, potentially one-third to one-half of the undergraduate social work students participating in their senior year field practicum could be older than the traditional-aged college student. Working under this assumption, most undergraduate social work students should also be considered adults.

Gaps in the Literature

Although social work literature does not address the issue of student preparedness to enter the workforce, other related fields do (e.g., business, psychology) and their findings are not encouraging. Both students and employers felt as though students were not ready to enter the workforce, despite having field placement experience, which is considered to be the best tool for solidification of learning. Likewise, social work research should explore this readiness to see if the findings are similar. Additionally, statistics show the continued issues that women, specifically, face in receiving lower pay and slower promotions than men in the social work field and academia (Holosko, et al., 2016). Unfortunately, how students navigate issues related to gender, and how those issues and others may influence their preparedness to enter the workforce has not yet been explored within the social work literature.

Problem Statement, Study Purpose and Research Questions

As mentioned previously, much literature exists that explores students' experiences during and immediately after their field practicums in an attempt to determine whether the experience was beneficial to their preparedness to enter the workforce. Alternatively, there is

little literature that exists that explores students' perceptions of their field practicum experience after they begin working in the field. Additionally, despite extensive documentation in social work of gender pay and promotion gaps (Holosko, et al., 2016; McPhail, 2004), there is little to no social work literature that exists exploring how students navigate those issues. Social work students often see males in positions such as department heads, department chairs, agency administrators, and executive directors with few female social work role models. This may have a career-limiting effect on female students. Additionally, Pease (2011) explains that since the social work field is commonly thought to be a female-dominated profession, the promotion and pay gaps are often swept under the rug. "Framing social work as a female-dominated profession hides sexism and male prejudice in social work. It is more accurate to refer to social work as a 'male-dominated female majority profession'" (p. 407). In light of this, opportunities during the field practicum, including female marginalization, must be explored to understand the field practicum experience as preparation for success in the social work workplace after graduation.

The purpose of this study, then, is two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation?
2. What are their perceptions of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences?

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks were used to structure the research methodology, data analysis, and the understanding and implications of the findings of this study: experiential learning theory, communities of practice, and critical feminist theory. Each theory will be briefly highlighted in this introduction, and each is explained in more depth in Chapter Two.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of hands-on learning opportunities and often occurs when students engage in field practicum activities, where they are engaging in problem-solving in a workplace setting with professionals and can learn from those experiences (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Kolb (1984) is credited with publishing the first Experiential Learning Theory Cycle, which consists of four main phases: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Abstract Experimentation. These phases explain the fundamentals of the experiential learning process: students engage in an experience, reflect on that experience afterwards, consider how they can use those skills in the future, and then attempt to use them later, at an appropriate time.

Experiential learning theory is heavily relied upon in the social work literature when discussing the field practicum experience. Researchers in the field agree that students may learn best from meeting real patients and seeing professionals interact with them in the current moment. These observations, along with eventual opportunities for students to problem-solve on their own solidifies knowledge learned in the classroom (Bertrander, 2009; Meade Byrd & Davis Bivens, 2011). Some social work scholars even expounded on Kolb's original learning theory to add a fifth aspect specifically related to social work: Formative Integration, or integrating "all aspects of learning in the process" and forming this knowledge into a "cohesive whole to make sense of it all and be able to apply skills fluidly and trans-theoretically in the future" (Cheung &

Delavega, 2014, p. 1074). Due to the holistic focus of social work practice, the addition of this fifth step provides a pathway to bring the whole learning experience together and prepare practitioners to apply it to future practice.

Experiential learning theory is also important to consider when attempting to understand the significance of the field practicum experience for social work students because the underlying assumption of the accrediting body for schools of social work, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), is that the field practicum is the cornerstone of social work pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). This means that experiential learning is the tool that is expected to solidify the knowledge and experiences the students have encountered in the classroom and prepare them for professional practice when they graduate. Exploring whether or not recently graduated social work students would agree with those sentiments provides valuable insight into how to better inform the field practicum experience to fit student needs.

Communities of Practice

A more specific type of experiential learning occurs when students engage with other students and/or with working professionals within communities of practice. As mentioned above, communities of practice occur when people come together who have similar interests (i.e., social work) and discuss problems, solutions, and best practices (Wenger, 1998). This process is often informal and groups come together organically. For example, the social workers at a particular agency may decide to have lunch together throughout the week, and, during that time, they discuss what is working well for them or with what they are struggling. Other practitioners have a chance to speak to their own experiences and they can learn from each other. In other agencies, social workers may create formal meeting times to get together for these conversations.

Engaging with a community of practice usually occurs during the social work field practicum experience, because students are working in conjunction with other social work professionals. Wenger (1998) is most often credited with formally pulling together the idea of communities of practice. He describes this idea in his first book on the topic:

We are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds... As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices... It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*. (p. 45)

These communities can occur anywhere, but they most often occur in the workplace environment. Groups of people who are doing the same thing and/or have the same goals at work learn new information as they communicate and work together. A group would not be considered a community of practice if they were only around each other once or twice; rather, a community of practice emphasizes the community aspect, so, it forms over time, while the same people are getting together repeatedly. For students and/or new employees, it can be a forum where community and workplace norms are solidified, as expectations are verbally and nonverbally passed among workers at the agency. When students arrive for the field practicum experience, they meet with the field instructor at that placement and review duties and tasks. The students essentially shadow the field instructor to observe and learn, and during that process they are introduced to the field instructor's community of practice. Emerging professionals start on the margins of a community of practice and move closer to the center once they understand the norms and practices of the fields.

The communities of practice framework is used in some field practicum literature, including in healthcare, school counseling, computer science, and even in the art of teaching painting (Klein, 2008; Morely, 2016; Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2017; Rohde, Klamma, Jarke, & Vulf, 2007; Woodside, Zeigler, & Paulus, 2009). Educators cite their reasoning for encouraging students to participate in a community of practice: “Knowledge and learning in communities of practice are not abstract models, but relations between a person and the world” (Rohde, et al., 2007, p.83). Instead of presenting knowledge abstractly in the classroom from a textbook, students learn knowledge from observing practitioners in real-world, problem-solving situations. Klein (2008) also argues that learning in communities of practice is altogether different, can be more beneficial than solely learning in the classroom, because students simultaneously observe others make different meanings from the same information, and are able to see how those students behave or act in response to their understandings. Students can then incorporate those observations into new practice skills that they attempt to use on their own.

The experiential learning and communities of practice theoretical frameworks were used while developing interview questions for the participants in my study. They also provided a perspective to use during data analysis to better understand how participants perceive the intersection of classroom knowledge and working professionals’ experiences, observations, and practical skills in the workplace during the field practicum. It also informs the understanding of how working with other professionals influences students’ learning about the profession during their field practicum.

Critical Feminist Theory

The final theory utilized to frame this study and its findings was critical feminist theory. The focus on power relationships within critical feminist theory developed from the foundations

of critical theory, but it has a feminist emphasis. At its most basic levels, critical theory is a viewpoint that attempts to bring to light the inequity and inequality built into all societies to further the agendas of the elite and maintain the status quo (Marx, Engels, & Lee, 1931). Especially in the field of adult education, critical feminist theory is considered to be an overarching term that addresses a variety of perspectives the critique power structures, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and much more. In this dissertation, it is used to critique the role of gender in participant experiences. By incorporating a feminist perspective, critical feminist theory focuses on empowering people, but specifically women, to become educated and aware of perpetuated societal injustices related to gender and to actively engage in corrective action in an attempt to combat those ingrained issues (Carpenter, 2010).

Foundationally, this lens assumes that all institutions have a history of systemic injustice towards people who are the minority in relationship to race, sexual orientation, class, and gender, among other marginalized groups. It also assumes that laws, rules, regulations, policies, and procedures, ranging in scope from the federal government to small local agencies, are tainted by a subconscious bias to the majority, resulting in disadvantage and oppression for the minority and those who do not have power or access to those who have power (Brookfield, 2005). As mentioned previously, there is a systemic gender inequality issue in the social work field (Pease, 2011). This critical feminist lens was used to understand social work students' experiences as they navigate an academic environment and a workplace where men hold the majority of the power and decision-making opportunities within the profession.

Similarly to how the experiential learning and communities of practice frameworks were used, critical feminist theory informed the development of the interview questions. This perspective also informed the analysis of how participants perceive those in positions of

authority in the social work workplace, to better understand what barriers exist to having their voices heard, and to consider subconscious, socially-constructed self-perceptions of their roles as females in the social work field. Additionally, it provides a lens to better understand their interactions with others within their communities of practice and their positionality within the hierarchy of the field.

Overview of Research Design

There are many different approaches that researchers can use to meet their research goals. Many researchers use quantitative research designs in which a survey instrument is used or an experiment is conducted as means of data collection. These methods attempt to obtain objective data that is as unbiased as possible. Others use qualitative research designs that rely heavily on interviews, observations, and artifacts to gain in-depth information about a specific phenomenon. This information is considered subjective, and its purpose is not meant to be generalizable, but rather to be informative and helpful to those in the field. While no research is ever completely objective, qualitative methods rely heavily on the researcher to obtain accurate data and present it to the readers as ethically and truthfully as possible, which is why the position of the researcher is often made explicitly clear in an attempt to maintain transparency for potential bias (Creswell, 2014). Lastly, some researchers attempt to combine both methods in a mixed methods approach to research that uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection. These approaches will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

To best answer the research questions in this study, a qualitative research design was used. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss that, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what

they experience” (p. 15). Two assumptions of qualitative research are that all information and experiences are subjective to the specific person who experiences it, and an absolute truth does not exist. Qualitative research does not seek to find an answer that can be ascribed to all members of a certain population. Instead, it seeks to learn and understand more about how a person or group of people makes meaning of an experience, to share similarities and differences that arise within that research study, and to discuss the implications of these findings for the field or the specific population.

This basic interpretive study seeks to better understand how social workers, within their first years of practicing after graduation, view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce and how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender disparities that exist within the field of social work during that experience. Purposeful sampling was used to identify study participants who: 1) graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree from a CSWE-accredited social work education institution; 2) immediately entered the workforce upon graduation and did not continue on to graduate school; and 3) have worked in the social work field post-graduation for at least one year. The last criterion was important, so that participants had time to reflect on their field practicum experience after they graduated and, ideally, could see how it influenced their preparedness when they entered the workforce.

Ten participants, who met the criteria, volunteered for the study. All participants were female, with nine Caucasian participants one Black participant. There was a mix of traditional and nontraditional students from one public and one private institution who graduated between 2014 and 2017. Each participant was interviewed two separate times.

Two main sources of data were collected: individual semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, relevant documents like student handbooks and student/agency learning contracts were analyzed. Overarching themes were extracted from the interviews and documents in an attempt to better understand the participants' experiences. Data transcription and analysis were confirmed by engaging in member checks with participants. Utilizing multiple sources, called data triangulation, aid in confirming the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2014). The specific details of the research methodology will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three.

Significance of the Study

Globally, the findings of this study may inform other fields of education that utilize a field practicum experience and want to ensure their students are prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation. The information gleaned from the interviews may also provide valuable information to other disciplines and workplace environments that provide field practicum experiences and are actively engaging in practices to improve that experience for students.

As the literature review in Chapter Two will show, little social work literature addresses the issue of preparedness for the workforce or gender inequality for students in the social work field or academia. Gender issues are not new and they pervade a spectrum of disciplines, universities, and workplaces. Some suggestions and solutions have been offered by a few scholars (Freedberg, 2009; Mallinger, Starks, & Tarter, 2017) in an attempt to combat these issues, but they have largely been unexplored up to this point. This research will provide much needed information in this area. Beyond the field of social work, this study will contribute to the argument for including undergraduate students and emerging adults in adult education research, in general.

Lastly, this study is significant to me, personally, because of the story I shared at the beginning of this chapter. It is overwhelming and discouraging to consider the number of social work students who have had to work in hostile environments, like the one I described. I am hopeful that awareness and education regarding gender issues that exist within social work academia and workplaces will help students who have experienced these issues better understand them, process, and move past those bad experiences. Additionally, clients will benefit from social workers who are confident in their skills, have diverse perspectives, and can provide higher quality services. More importantly, I hope that awareness and enlightenment will begin to eliminate the opportunities for this injustice to exist in the first place.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Strengths

Every researcher enters his or her research journey with consciously and subconsciously held assumptions regarding the study that will be performed. In an effort to maintain transparency, the assumptions of this study will be listed, so that the reader is aware of the researcher's position. The researcher holds all of the assumptions listed below and some of these assumptions are also held by the CSWE as shown by the field practicum requirement for graduation with a BSW. Additionally, the possible limitations and expected strengths of the study will also be considered.

Assumptions

1. Field practicums should be a beneficial educational experience for students.
2. Students are more prepared to work autonomously after graduation if they have had "real" workplace experience prior to graduating.
3. Learning can happen in community with other students, educators, and professionals.

4. Social work educators and field practicum instructors want their students to be successful and find gainful employment post-graduation.
5. There is a known gender pay and promotion gap in the social work field, both professionally and academically, which needs to be remedied.
6. Society, its institutions, and its people are affected by both conscious and subconscious biases that serve to promote the elite and to oppress the minority or the “other.”
7. Exploring and discussing social work students’ experiences and interactions with oppression, disadvantage, or discrimination during their field practicum will help educators and field instructors be more aware of the challenges that students must overcome to be successful.

Limitations

No study is perfect, and all studies have potential barriers, influences, and limitations. One limitation of this study is that the sample size is small. Some readers may feel that the findings are not beneficial if the topic is so inconspicuous that the research cannot be used by anyone else; but qualitative research is not designed to be widely generalizable. Alternatively, having large sample sizes, as with quantitative studies, can be viewed as not being beneficial, because only the majority is recognized, and the minority views are not expressed or heard. Another limitation to this study is that all participants were women, and almost all of them were Caucasian. The sample is not indicative of the demographics of social work students or social work practitioners.

Additionally, as described in the opening paragraphs of this introductory chapter, I have had poor experiences with field supervisors in the past. This experience may bias my interpretations of interviewees’ stories. Although I am at a disadvantage in society because I am

a woman, I still maintain many advantages. I have a graduate-level education, mid-level income, and am a Caucasian, Christian, U.S. citizen. This makes it more difficult to genuinely understand experiences from participants who may be of different religious, cultural, racial, and class backgrounds, thus it was important to have participants confirm their meanings and my understanding of them.

Lastly, many graduates rely on networking opportunities, referrals, and reference letters to change jobs or receive admission into graduate school. Despite my explanation that their interviews will be kept completely anonymous, students may have been concerned that the findings would be shared with their undergraduate school or field practicum agency. They may have provided more positive information that may not have been entirely truthful to avoid inhibiting those important relationships.

Strengths

Qualitative research methods, though the sample sizes may be small, allow researchers to dig into the rich meanings the participants hold about an experience. One strength of this study is that, although these experiences may not be applicable to every other person in these situations, providing themes, conclusions, and implications of those experiences can be helpful to expand the knowledge base of practitioners and academics. It can open the door to further exploration, and encourage other researchers to study topics that may be similar, but are particular to his or her specific field. The findings are not meant to summarize or generalize to an entire population, but to provide a window into specific experiences and to discuss what the implications of the findings could mean for bettering education or experiences.

Additionally, the lack of research in this area will strengthen the perspective within the field and attempt to alleviate an issue that I have dealt with personally. Lastly, the purpose of

providing the assumptions, limitations, and the background of the researcher (provided in Chapter Three) have been included in an effort to maintain transparency and provide the most accurate information possible.

Definition of Terms

In order to understand the background of the research presented in the next chapter, and the findings and discussion presented in the chapters to follow, it is important for the reader to have the same understanding of some of the most important concepts in this study. For that reason, the following list provides terms and definitions that may be helpful for the reader:

- 1. Communities of Practice-** Often organically formed groups of people who share a common interest and can learn from each other's experiences. In this context, communities of practice that occur within social work could include social work students in a classroom together or at a workplace during their field practicum interacting with other working professionals and learning from them.
- 2. Critical Feminist Theory-** Critical feminist theory offers a perspective that focuses on empowering people, but specifically women, to become educated and aware of perpetuated societal injustices related to their gender and to actively engage in corrective action in an attempt to combat those ingrained issues.
- 3. Experiential Learning-** Hands-on learning opportunities (e.g. field practicum, case studies, role playing).
- 4. Field Practicum-** Social work students attending accredited universities are required by CSWE to participate in a field practicum during their final year in the program. This is a hands-on learning experience where a student shadows a working social work professional and has opportunities to practice social work skills in a work environment.

5. **Field Instructor-** The field instructor for a social work students' field practicum is the students' supervisor who provides instructions, explanations, and is responsible for developing and implementing learning opportunities for the student.
6. **Gender-** Society's perceived maleness or femaleness as exhibited by the looks, voice, dress, or characteristics of a person.
7. **Institutionalized Injustice-** In most societies the people in power have used their beliefs to develop systems, policies, rules and procedures that perpetuate the success of the elite and the oppression of the minority or the "other".
8. **Signature Pedagogy-** The foundational element of a learning experience or curriculum. For example, social work students receive plenty of credit hours learning about theory and how to become a social work professional, but the foundational element of their education is the field practicum experience that solidifies the knowledge acquired in the classroom.
9. **Social Work Education/Academia-** Undergraduate colleges and universities who offer a Bachelor's of Social Work program that is accredited by CSWE.

Conclusion

This chapter served to conceptualize the background information that informed this study, provide an overview of the study itself, and discuss the problem statement and research questions. It also served to provide definitions for key terms, explanations of the theoretical perspectives held by the researcher in analyzing the findings, provided assumptions, limitations, and strengths of the study, and the overall significance of the study in both the adult education literature, the field of social work, and any field that relies on field practicum experience. Chapter Two will provide a detailed summary of the literature that is related to this topic or this

study. Chapter Three will review the research methodology used in this study. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study and Chapter Five will discuss the conclusions and implications from those findings.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will provide an overview of social work education, social work education's mandatory fourth year field practicum, and discuss theoretical perspectives that will be used to understand the field practicum experience. It will also review the literature that exists related to the social work field practicum specifically, its effectiveness in preparing students for the workplace, and the gender gap students encounter during that experience. Lastly, the review will discuss why undergraduate social work students should be considered adult learners.

Guiding the study and this literature review are the following research questions:

1. How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation?
2. What are their perceptions of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences?

The Field Practicum Experience

Clinical education curricula, including the hard sciences, social sciences, and medicine, emphasizes student learners having direct practice experience and hands-on learning to solidify the knowledge they gain from textbooks, assigned readings, and classroom lectures. This emphasis often results in a requirement for students to complete a field practicum or internship experience in a workplace during the school year or over the summer for classroom credit.

Overview of the Field Practicum

Literature within the fields of medical education and education in the hard sciences suggests that knowledge and reasoning is inextricably linked to the environment in which the learning occurred, and that clinical reasoning cannot be learned unless a clinician is in a work

environment; it cannot be re-created well in a classroom (McBee, et al., 2015; Sweeney & Paradis, 2004). For example, students need to see chemical processes occur in a laboratory, to truly understand the information in a textbook. This is a widely-accepted value of most clinical education programs and, thus, is usually a required part of the educational experience for students in a clinical field.

Accredited social work education institutions require a clinical component where students must spend time in the field. This is true for both bachelor's and master's level accredited social work education curricula (Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation, 2016). Ideally, the field practicum experience solidifies classroom knowledge and allows students to work in a "real-time" environment. It is considered the cornerstone of clinical education, social work included.

Overview of Social Work Education

The standards for schools of social work are updated and evaluated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). This accrediting body determines what requirements students must complete prior to graduation to ensure competent social work graduates (CSWE, 2017). The National Association of Social Work (NASW) has established six core values of the profession: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, integrity, importance of human relationships, and competence (NASW, 2008). The CSWE accredits social work programs that can provide proof that their curriculum prepares students to meet these six core values of the social work profession by the time they graduate.

The CSWE (2015) also outlines nine competencies that students in accredited schools of social work must meet. They will:

- 1) Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior;

- 2) Engage in diversity and difference in practice;
- 3) Advance human rights and social, economic, and environment justice;
- 4) Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice;
- 5) Engage in policy practice;
- 6) Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities;
- 7) Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities;
- 8) Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; and
- 9) Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. (p. 3)

Competencies may be met through content presented in multiple classes, or there may be a class specifically devoted to meeting a competency. For example, a class on social work policy could meet the competency related to engaging in policy practice, whereas a class on psychotherapy with individuals could meet competency requirements six through nine, all within the same class. Students are evaluated on meeting these competencies by their professors, based on their classroom performance, and by their field instructors during their required field practicum.

To meet the competencies, however, CSWE-accredited schools are also required to have students complete a field practicum during the fourth year of their program, with a minimum of 400 practice hours prior to graduation (CSWE, 2016). CSWE (2015) explains the rationale for this requirement:

Signature pedagogies are elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline—to

think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity. Field education is the signature pedagogy for social work. (p. 12)

Students usually complete these hours during their fourth or final year in the program at an agency of their choosing, depending on their area of interest and agency availability. Occasionally, depending on the size of the school, students may be assigned to an agency based on a questionnaire that explores their interests, but, often, students want to choose their specific placements. Students and their agency field instructors complete a learning contract at the beginning of the field practicum that identifies the activities students will complete or participate in during the practicum to address each of the nine competencies. Their field instructors then evaluate students at the midterm and at the completion of the semester to determine the degree to which they are meeting the competencies. Students must pass the field practicum experience to graduate.

Although there is little critique in the research literature related to the field practicum experience in social work education, some educators have questioned whether the assumption that the field practicum should be mandated is based on results found in the social work literature. When the CSWE declared the field practicum experience a mandatory part of social work education, Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, and Ferrell (2011) noted that although this practice is almost unanimously accepted as the cornerstone of social work education, more distinct literature was necessary to support that claim. Literature that exists related to the perceived effectiveness and student preparedness pre- and post-field practicum is discussed below in an attempt to solidify the foundations of this claim and discuss where more research is needed.

Empirical Literature Related to Social Work Field Practice

Two issues seem to surface in the literature that impact students' success during their field practicum and possibly their ability to join the workforce after graduation; effectiveness of the field practicum and student preparedness for and from the field practicum.

Effectiveness. The majority of the literature that exists related to the social work field practicum either addresses students' thoughts regarding their placement experiences or instructors' feedback regarding student performance. Social work educators and researchers have contributed to the existing literature on the effectiveness of this experience by reflecting on their students' feedback after their field practicum:

Students seem to have grasped the lessons they were intended to learn. They grew in self-reflection and self-awareness, they stepped outside of their comfort zone, they had their own stereotypes and biases challenged, and by in large, they got a glimpse of the need for well-trained social workers... (Young, Lee, & Kovacs, 2016, p. 5)

Based on the feedback received from students, instructors believe this fieldwork is effective in helping students learn what they need to know.

Unanimously accepted as being an effective practice, and thus considered the signature pedagogy of the social work education experience, the literature most often discusses the correlation between high quality supervisor-student supervision and students' perceived effectiveness of their field placement. Studies in which social work students were interviewed regarding what was most helpful for them in making their field practicum a success listed quality supervision as a major factor (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Klein, 2015; Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Petril, Fireman, Schnoll Fitzpatrick, Wertheimer Hodas, & Taussig, 2015; Sunirose, 2013).

Similarly, many conceptual models published by social work educators listed quality supervision as one of the most important factors of student success in the field practicum (Bennett, 2008, Bogo, 2015, Homonoff, 2008). One question that still needs to be addressed is, how do we know students are being provided with high quality supervision? Although that question does not seem to be answered directly in the literature, it may be answered by discovering whether students are prepared to start working after graduation, since high quality supervision is shown to improve the effectiveness of the field placement.

Unfortunately, a major gap in the literature exists here and no studies could be found specifically related to social work students' preparedness for the workforce post-field practicum. Most of the literature on student preparedness was related to students' feelings on being prepared to begin their field practicum, not on their preparedness to start working post-graduation. According to Kanno and Koeske (2010) and Narayanan et al. (2010), social work students reported higher feelings of satisfaction and efficacy of their field placements if they felt adequately prepared to begin their field practicum.

Student preparedness for the workforce. Although the social work literature does not often respond to this question, some insights can be gained from psychology and business literature centered on student readiness for the workforce after they complete their practicum experience. The consensus from this literature is that students are not overwhelmingly prepared to enter the workforce after these experiences. Studies in both fields show that about half of the time, students responded that they did not feel prepared to enter the workforce, and more than half of the time, businesses responded that they did not feel that students were prepared to start working after their field experiences (Borden & Rajewski, 2000; Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton,

2012). Strikingly, in the latter study, 72% of the instructors in the business school stated that they felt students *were* prepared, indicating a clear disconnect in stakeholder perceptions.

Vinton and Wilke (2011) completed a study exploring instructor assessments of students and students' self-assessments. They discovered that when field instructors had to assess and give feedback to students in person, they rated them higher than if they gave feedback anonymously. Even the students were more critical of their own skills and abilities than the in-person instructor ratings were. However, when field instructors gave feedback anonymously, it matched the students' self-assessments and was slightly less positive than the in-person ratings. Vinton and Wilke's study, then, demonstrates that students may not be adequately informed of areas where they need continued growth. Additionally, Sunirose (2013) points out a major issue that occurs when schools and agencies are not aligned: agencies use students to complete tasks that are helpful to the agencies, but may not be helpful to fulfill the goals and objectives of the social work program.

Discouraging as these different perceptions appear, and despite the lack of social work literature in this area, pilot programs and program recommendations for schools of social work exist to encourage collaboration with agencies and community programs and to co-develop structures that would expose students to useful skills and experiences. These collaborative programs have the potential to increase student preparedness to enter the workforce (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012; Sunirose, 2013; Voisin, Wong, & Miranda Samuels, 2014). By collaborating, both the schools and the agencies would be stakeholders in the co-developed programs, which might make agencies more agreeable to assisting students in meeting competency objectives and could make both parties more invested in students' success after graduation.

In fact, this type of partnership is not a new idea. Bristol (1951) published an article describing a similar collaboration between the social work program through the University of Jacksonville and the local human services agencies. The intent was to expose students to what they needed to know to enter the workforce, and they found that this model was effective for student learning. Six decades later, recommendations continue to stress the importance of collaboration in ensuring student success.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives were utilized during this study to examine both the literature that already exists and the findings that ultimately became known after the interviews. Experiential learning theory, communities of practice theory, and critical feminist theory were used as the foundation to understand research in the field and the findings from this study. All three perspectives will be discussed in detail here.

As mentioned previously, the idea that some of the most pertinent learning occurs for students through direct experience is not a new one. John Dewey is often credited as being the first to publicly discuss the important role of experience in education. In the early 1900s, Dewey wrote that he believed experience is a key learning tool, because it provides continuity and interaction for students. He referenced continuity in the sense that students can use information gleaned from their prior experiences, including classroom experiences and textbook knowledge, to build onto their current experiences (Dewey, 1916). Dewey taught in the Kindergarten-12th grade (K-12) system and, although, at the time, adult education was not recognized as being distinctly different from child and adolescent education, his words and recommendations regarding the importance of experiential learning can still be applied to education today, including adult education. Direct learning experiences provide opportunities for students to

interact with and actively test hypotheses in a real environment (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner 2007).

In his *Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey (1897) suggested that education cannot be separated from experience: “I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (p.79). Later, Eduard Lindeman (1926) would continue Dewey’s sentiment regarding how crucial experience is in the learning process emphasizing that the most valuable resource in education is the learner’s experience. Eventually, the continued emphasis that some educators place on the necessity of experience in learning would formally become known as experiential learning theory.

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning occurs in many types of settings. Although it commonly happens outside of the classroom in more informal settings, in some circumstances it can be included inside the classroom. As Austin and Rust (2015) point out, “experiential learning is simply defined as “hands on” learning and may involve any of the following activities: service learning, applied learning in the discipline, co-operative education, internships, study abroad, and experimental activities.” (p. 1) As such, many educators have moved beyond the confines of the traditional didactic lecture method of knowledge transmission in the classroom towards incorporating more class discussions, role plays, group work, media, and simulations that provide opportunities for students to actively interact with the course content. Because of the diversity of applications, experiential learning can take place in a wide variety of settings and classes.

When students engage in field practicum opportunities in a workplace setting with professionals, they engage in problem-solving and can learn from those practice experiences. In fact, in a recent re-print of Dewey's 1916 *Democracy and Education* (2008), he suggests, "The more human the purpose, or the more it approximates the ends which appeal in daily experience, the more real the knowledge" (p. 90). He is speaking to the fact that the truer the experience is to reality, the better the knowledge and learning that comes from it.

Kolb (1984) is credited with publishing the first Experiential Learning Theory Cycle that consists of four main phases: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. Concrete Experience is the specific hands-on activity in which a learner engages. Reflective Observation occurs both during and after the hands-on activity experience. Learners engage with previously learned knowledge and experiences and think through how they apply during the new learning activity. They also reflect back on the experience after it is over and make new knowledge connections. Abstract Conceptualization occurs when students consider how real-life situations connect with the classroom activity or simulation. In a workplace setting, learners consider abstract knowledge and previous experiences to better understand how they relate to the new experience. The final phase, Active Experimentation, is the process through which the learner uses the previous experience and the new knowledge and insight to make plans to use the new knowledge in current or future practice (Kolb, 1984). The four phases of experiential learning, "permit the learner to get experience from concrete activities and reflect on the experience, while utilizing the experience to conceptualize knowledge and understand how to apply abstract knowledge to active experimentation" (Cheung & Delavega, 2014, p. 1071), and then to the real world.

Kolb credits Dewey's work for his inspiration in developing this model and concurs with Dewey's sentiment that learning comes from experience and the two cannot be separated. "Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (Kolb, 1984, p. 27). Although criticized due to a lack of attention to cultural variations in the learning process and to the etiology and ontology of knowledge acquisition (Merriam, et al., 2007), Kolb's model is still often used as a foundational framework for researchers and for educators engaging in experiential learning activities in the classroom with their learners across a broad spectrum of educational subjects, even with topics that in the past have not emphasized clinical experience, like Young, Lee, and Kovacs' BSW course on aging (2016). In the social work curriculum at their university, a class on aging was offered to students, but it had no clinical component. An experiential component was incorporated in the class during which students volunteered in an agency that works with older adults, and students reported feeling more positively towards working with older adults after their experiences.

Jarvis (2006) expanded on Kolb's experiential learning theory cycle by incorporating a person's background into consideration when discussing student-learning experiences. He also differentiated between non-reflective and reflective learning. People bring their own history (e.g., geographical, psychological, social, cultural) into every learning situation. These differences influence learning and should be considered when instructors are creating and evaluating course content or field experiences. Jarvis also argues that just because a student engages in a hands-on experience does not mean that true reflection has occurred, a key phase in the experiential learning cycle. In response, he posits that there are two types of experiential learning: non-reflective and reflective. Non-reflective learning occurs when a student engages in a learning experience, and then later repeats the same steps without considering why. Jarvis calls

this content knowledge. Reflective learning occurs when a student reflects on the experience, during and after it occurs, to make meaning of it and to incorporate other knowledge and previous learning with the new knowledge acquired from that experience. He refers to this as process knowledge, or understanding the why and how behind what is done. Jarvis argues that, “theory follows practice and that we learn in the doing” (p.148); and, therefore, knowledge cannot be constructed outside of direct experience.

Alternatively, Jarvis also states that he believes new learning rarely occurs, because learners may often choose experiences that are already familiar to them that they feel comfortable participating in and thus will deny themselves new learning experiences that may challenge already held beliefs and assumptions. He also goes on to discuss how students experience non-learning, non-consideration, ambivalence, and rejection of learning. When opportunities are presented to learners, but because of their inattentiveness or disinterest, they move through an experiential learning opportunity without actually learning anything new (Jarvis, 2010). Though it is helpful, experiential learning is not a guarantee of student learning.

Fenwick (2001) summarizes experiential learning theory well, by stating, “Through experience, a learner is believed to construct a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world” (p. 6). Experience is a highly personalized and subjective experience. She suggests that there are multiple possible approaches to experiential learning depending on the learners’ needs. First, learners can participate in an experience, possibly in the classroom, and then spend time reflecting on that experience and building new knowledge gleaned from it. Second, learners can participate in a community of practice. Third, learners can engage in a psychoanalytic approach to past experiences to get in

touch with unconscious thoughts/feelings/emotions/fears. Lastly, learners can engage in critical experiences by actively resisting social norms.

Merriam et. al (2007) agree with Fenwick’s suggestion that depending on learners’ needs, experiential learning can look very different. It could be,

direct embodied experience that engages... mentally, physically, and emotionally in the moment. Other dimensions of experience include learning from a simulated experience or reliving a past experience. In addition, people may make sense of their experience through collaboration with others in a community (sometimes referred to as communities of practice)... (p. 159)

Ideally, because of its flexible nature, experiential learning activities could be incorporated into any class, and students would benefit. There is ample literature supporting the use of experiential learning within schools of social work.

Empirical Literature Related to Experiential Learning and Social Work Education

Social work educators have spent time evaluating experiential learning activities used during class time and during the required field practicum to enhance student learning. They report many of the same results that researchers outside of their field mentioned. “Key learning included... links made in the groups—between the experiential and theoretical, the emotional and cognitive, and the structural and personal” (Milne & Adams, 2015, p.74). Experiential learning is also discussed in international social work literature.

Experiential learning in the classroom. As online/virtual education has become more prominent due to time, location, and financial constraints for students, Huerta-Wong and Schoech (2010) studied both virtual and face-to-face social work education environments to see if experiential learning (watching media, role-playing, group projects, etc.) was an effective

means of learning versus the traditional lecture/discussion approach. Students in the virtual environment engaged in discussion, media watching, role-playing, and group projects to use forms of experiential learning to solidify their new knowledge. Students in the face-to-face classroom environment listened to lectures and viewed PowerPoints. Students in both environments (virtual and face-to-face) self-reported whether or not they felt like they met their learning objectives for the class. In terms of satisfaction, perception of learning gains, learning quality, and skills acquisition, experiential learning was more effective than lecture/discussion.

Experiential learning during the field practicum. As noted, the CSWE accreditation requirements show that workplace learning and direct experience are considered a pedagogical foundation in the social work profession. Benander (2009) agrees with this need for experiences further stating that,

Experiential learning conceives of the adult learner as participating in an activity, then reflecting on the activity to make generalizations that he or she can then apply in new situations. One of the specific values of experiential learning is the immersion of the participant in social constructions and cultural expectations specific to the experience. (p. 36)

If, as Benander (2009) suggests, experiential learning is contingent upon the social and cultural constructions of each person's experience, an emphasis on the value of student field experiences provides justification for experiential learning theories to be utilized when investigating student experiences. Experiential learning provides insight into how students learn and make meaning during the undergraduate social work field practicum.

The Five Way Experiential Model presented by Cheung and Delavega (2014) builds on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory Cycle and applies it directly to assessing student

experiences during a semester of social work field practicum. They applied the four steps in the cycle to the students' debriefing upon completion of their field experiences and found that the experiential learning cycle held true for the students' clinical experiences. In fact, Cheung and Delavega were able to add to Kolb's cycle to create a fifth element that is specifically related to social work: Formative Integration, which can "integrate all aspects of learning in the process and form the knowledge into a cohesive whole to make sense of it all and be able to apply skills fluidly and transtheoretically in the future" (p. 1074). Due to the holistic nature of social work practice, the addition of this fifth step provides a pathway to bring the whole experience of social work education together for application to future practice.

Considering the deemed necessity of field experience in social work education curricula by the accrediting body and the amount of literature that exists supporting experiential learning as a foundational lens through which to view social work field practicum experience, it makes sense to use experiential learning as a theoretical framework to understand the social work field practicum. Additionally, since students make meaning of new experiences through the lens of their cultural and societal upbringing and participation, it is most important to investigate their particular understanding of their experiential learning. Lastly, the additions that researchers have made specifically for the social work education field practicum after directly applying experiential learning principles to understanding their students' learning make it practical to use experiential learning theory as a lens through which to continue to investigate student experiences in undergraduate social work field practicums.

International social work education and experiential learning. The concept of experiential learning in social work education is not confined to the U.S.; it is also a topic in the social work education literature from other countries, such as the U.K., Australia, China, and the

Caribbean. Tie'er (2013) discusses limitations that exist when students' education is centered on the classrooms and textbooks instead of on hands-on experience. The author discusses these issues in Chinese social work education in light of the traditional, mainstream Chinese classroom. In this setting, an emphasis is placed on textbooks and knowledge over hands-on practice. It is,

deep-rooted and encompasses social work education, placing significant limitations on social work education with its practice-centered orientation and emphasis on interaction and the individual. If social work education continues with this traditional educational philosophy and model, and does not change, it will be very difficult to train qualified, indigenous social work personnel. (p. 50)

Alternatively, in the U.K. and the Caribbean, like in the U.S., there is a distinct practice component included where students can study abroad or domestically and work within social welfare agencies. Although there is much written about international programs sending their students to other countries for practicum, there is a wide range of issues and considerations regarding those cross-cultural experiences (for example, Crabtree, Parker, Azman, & Mas'ud, 2014) that will not be discussed here. As far as domestic experience, the social work program at the University of the West Indies in Barbados requires a one-year field practicum where students are placed in local agencies. In 2010, the university completed an evaluation of their program and found that, "Students find it useful and report that they learn more with long term exposure to client systems. They are also able to develop practice skills with client groups..." (Rock & Ring, 2010). Due to both the continued requirement of the field practicum component in multiple other countries and the positive experiences from the study cited above, some of the international social work literature confirms that experiential learning activities offer social work

students opportunities to learn in workplace environments, with real clients, and alongside practicing professionals, instead of living in the theoretical, abstract realm of knowledge that can exist within the classroom.

Communities of Practice

A more specific type of experiential learning occurs when students engage with communities of practice. Wenger (1998) described the idea of communities of practice in his first book:

We are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds... As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices... It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*. (p. 45)

Perhaps Wenger's theory is better summarized by Jakovljevic, Buckley, and Buchney, (2013) statement that, "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1107). Communities of practice can be required to form by either a professor or a supervisor who requires certain people to meet together in the classroom or in the workplace, but they most often occur organically in the workplace environment. Groups of people who are doing the same thing in the workplace often communicate with each other and work together they learn new information. This is also an environment where community and workplace norms are solidified as expectations are verbally and nonverbally passed among workers. This type of experiential learning, as noted above, is more specific. Communities of practice are different from experiential learning in the same way that all squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are

squares; all communities of practice provide experiential learning opportunities, but not all experiential learning occurs through communities of practice.

The communities of practice framework is commonly used in field practicum literature in fields ranging from school counseling to computer science and even in the art of teaching painting (Klein, 2008; Rohde, Klamma, Jarke, & Vulf, 2007; Woodside, Zeigler, & Paulus, 2009). Educators cite their reasoning for encouraging students to participate in a community of practice: “Knowledge and learning in communities of practice are not abstract models, but relations between a person and the world” (Rohde, et al., 2007, p.83). Instead of presenting knowledge abstractly in the classroom from a textbook, students learn knowledge from observing practitioners in real-world, problem-solving situations. Klein (2008) also argues that learning in communities of practice is altogether different and can be more beneficial than solely learning in the classroom, because students simultaneously observe their fellow students making different meaning from the same information and see how those people behave or act in response to their understandings. Students can then incorporate those observations into new practice skills that they attempt to use on their own.

Communities of practice have been commended in the healthcare sector as a way to promote learning, especially in the nursing field. These studies suggest that communities of practice can be influential in learning, due to the interactions between the inexperienced student learners and the experienced mentor clinicians in the field (Morely, 2016; Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2017). Pyrko, Dorfler and Eden (2017) explain that in communities of practice, clinicians are thinking together, and, “thinking together stresses that tacit knowledge is shared only in the sense that it is redeveloped as people discover each other’s performances in practice and they learn together and from each other, rather than being acquired or replicated” (p. 406).

Knowledge is learned and reworked together as each person experiences it and these communities allow space for discourse where each person can share their experience and others can learn from their perceptions of that experience as well.

There is documented concern for student education in communities of practice if they are not brought into the fold of the community and only left at the periphery to observe. Literature in nursing education suggests that, although the periphery still provides opportunities to see clinical processes that aid in education and understanding, it can often cause feelings of marginalization from not being included (Jorgensen & Hadders, 2015; Molesworth, 2017). Molesworth (2017) interviewed seventeen nursing students who shared that their position on the periphery of nursing care allowed them to learn via observation, but they felt marginalized because they could not engage in practice in the field or work closely alongside a clinician. Jorgensen and Hadders (2015) interviewed seven nursing students and had very similar findings; they were able to benefit from observing on the periphery, but were at risk of marginalization because they were not brought into the community of practice. In these situations, students can miss the more in-depth insights gained from moving deeper into the communities of practice, because they do not observe the discourse, knowledge transfer, and problem-solving that clinicians participate in together. Both Jorgensen and Hadders (2015) and Molesworth (2017) suggest that a close relationship with the supervising clinician or the practicum supervisor from the school could assist with moving students to a more integrated position within the community of practice.

Due to its benefits, it might be tempting, then, to try to purposefully establish a community of practice for students to bring them into the fold of a workplace, but groups that are not formed organically can be met with resistance (Kothari, Boyko, Conklin, Stolee, & Sibbald,

2015) and may not function well (Ranmuthugala, et al., 2011). Kothari et al. (2015) published a qualitative study on a community of practice within the healthcare sector in Canada. They noted that mandating communities of practice platforms in this healthcare sector caused complaints from staff and management due to increased time constraints and a tension between spending time facilitating a community of practice and needing to spend time on federal and state requirements for yearly continuing education for clinicians. “Bringing together a group of people and calling them a CoP [community of practice] does not mean they will function as one” (Ranmuthugala, et al., 2011, p. 14). Despite the extensive amount of literature studying communities of practice in nursing and healthcare, most studies suggest that continued research is still needed to better understand how to encourage and facilitate the establishment of communities of practice and how to support them within the field so they can maximize benefits (Ranmuthgala, et al., 2011).

In light of these benefits, communities of practice have the potential to provide valuable experience for learners, especially students seeking to enter the workforce in a specific career-field upon graduation. The internship or field practicum experience serves as preparation for students prior to graduation. Educators arrange a real workplace situation where learners can participate in everyday workplace assignments and problem-solving alongside professionals in their communities of practice. Students are introduced to real workplace problems, but have the supervision of the workplace mentor, other professionals in the workplace in their community of practice, and the classroom educator to assist in critical thinking and decision-making. This community provides information, support, and hopefully encouragement for students to gain practice experience in preparation to enter the field. Fenwick (2001) concurs, “The educator’s role... is in providing just-in-time assistance to enable confident action in situations where

competence is lacking” (p. 121). Supervised participation in communities of practice encourages students to engage in learning about the profession while simultaneously providing the support needed to help make informed decisions about practice.

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) go so far as to argue that communities of practice are the key element for building knowledge in the workplace and give learners a lasting competitive advantage. They provide opportunities for students to practice strategy, solve problems, transfer best practice ideas, and develop professional skills from their future colleagues. They can introduce students to workplace cultures and provide insight to verbally and nonverbally communicated expectations in the field, and they provide opportunities for workplaces to assess students and evaluate possible hireable talent.

Empirical Literature Related to Communities of Practice and Social Work

There is empirical literature that explores communities of practice within the context of the social work workplace, social work education, and the social work student field placement experience. It can be utilized by students as well as for practicing professionals in general.

Social work education. There is a small selection of literature that discusses communities of practice being utilized within social work education specifically. Edmonds-Cady and Sosulski (2010) describe observing their students’ experiences participating in communities of practice during coursework that required them to complete a field practicum component. As they evaluated their social work students’ participation in professional communities of practice, they observed,

As they become involved as equal members of a team that includes the instructor, their student colleagues, and professional relationships that they seek out, students learn to

reflect on their experiences, synthesize different kinds of information, effectively evaluate situations, and make difficult decisions. (p. 46)

The communities of practice the students participated in assisted them to integrate their schoolwork to the workplace experiences and prepared them to become practitioners that are more competent.

Interestingly, the other context in which communities of practice is discussed in social work education is in the online sphere. Hybrid and online courses are becoming increasingly popular in schools of social work. Davis and Goodman (2014) discuss that these virtual platforms have created communities of practice with spaces for students to blog, chat, post discussions, and interact with each other as they move through the social work curriculum. The authors' study of the student interactions that occurred on this platform showed that students became, "increasingly intimate in their online exchanges over time and readily provided each other support in applying course content in their practice" (p. 85). This platform provided a space for students to develop an online community of practice in which they could actively participate.

Social work profession. The majority of studies regarding communities of practice and social workers discussed the importance of virtual communities of practice for practicing social work professionals (Adedoyin, 2016; Bosco-Ruggiero, Kollar, Strand, & Leake, 2015; Cook-Craig & Sabah, 2009; Staempfli, Tov, Kunz, Tschopp, & Stamm, 2016). Online platforms offer opportunities for practicing social workers to share new research, offer innovative practice techniques, exchange their practice knowledge with each other, and to ask and answer questions. The only limitation to this platform that causes some social workers to inhibit their engagement

is concerns for patient confidentiality (Adedoyin, 2016). Otherwise, it seems to be an up-and-coming space for organic communities of practice to form.

Staempfli, Tov, Kunz, Tschopp, and Stamm (2016) studied the purposeful establishment of virtual communities of practice in the social work field. They found favorable results indicating that social workers benefited from a location to ask questions and discuss issues in their professional spheres. Although communities of practice can form organically, this empirical study, along with another conceptual piece (Gray, Parker, & Immins, 2008), discusses the possibilities of organizations establishing communities of practice to benefit the practitioners and thus the organization as a whole. It is possible that communities of practice that were purposefully created by an organization may not function as well as organically-created communities of practice because social workers may not want to participate, may feel forced, or may feel as though the organization is intruding on their personal concerns and practice. Despite the clear connection and relevancy that communities of practice have with social work students' and professionals' experiences, no other empirical studies were found that explicitly discussed the phenomenon.

Professional Socialization

Often, experiential learning experiences, including engaging in a community of practice, are opportunities where students become socialized to the social work profession. Stempfli et al. (2016) discuss using communities of practice within social work to enhance professionalism through reflection and discourse. The acquisition of a sense of professionalism is important as students prepare to enter the workforce, because they need to know how to do their jobs practically, not just theoretically. In fact, Barretti (2004) argues that professional socialization in the field of social work occurs even before students begin a social work program. It begins with

their first interaction with the human services field, maybe from a social worker or through hearing about social services from the media.

According to Miller (2013), the social work student's professional socialization experience is made up of three stages:

(1) content, which includes technical skills and knowledge imparted during formal education as well as values, norms, and attitudes; (2) structure, which includes institutionalized social work education as well as the particular organization of each school of social work; and (3) the process of change, which captures the dynamic and individually idiosyncratic elements of professional socialization contingent on relationships with key figures, and choices regarding whether or how to accept socializing messages received through content and structure. (p. 370)

It is important for students to acquire technical skills and knowledge, experience the structure of the school of social work, the social work workplace, and growth from interactions with fellow social workers and even other outside professionals. They may gain this socialization from participating in communities of practice and experiential learning opportunities in social work agencies. Wiles (2013) summarizes the idea of professional identity formation in the classroom and the workplace:

Acquiring a specified knowledge base, understanding social work values, and being able to integrate these with practice are essential components of professional competence...

This can only emerge through opportunities to articulate this identity in both the workplace and the academic setting. (p. 864)

Barretti (2004) also points out that during this time of professional socialization, "unwelcome social advances by male professionals in the field reported by some of the female

students, suggest that women's professional socialization experiences are not immune from societal gender inequities” (p. 23). Unfortunately, some female social work students may learn things about their workplace roles that may be inhibiting them personally and professionally due to institutionalized gender biases. For example, they may not feel comfortable applying for a promotion because they do not see any women in positions of authority in their agency.

Experiential learning opportunities and participating in communities of practice allow students to have opportunities to learn new skills, practice the skills acquired in the classroom, and become socialized to the workplace environment. Those experiences are irreplaceable and cannot be adequately replicated in the classroom. The field practicum experience solidifies classroom knowledge and allows students to gain confidence by learning workplace norms and by attempting to use skills on their own.

Gender in Higher Education

In the U.S., it is well-documented that women are not hired and not paid at the same rate as men are within higher education according to the American Association of University Women (2017). This has been a long-standing issue that is mostly centered on the idea that women’s jobs have been to raise children and take care of them home and they have not had time to move forward in their careers due to their other maternal obligations. This continues to be reinforced presently through discourse in the workplace, as Mayock (2016) describes when she is often pitied for how difficult it must be for her to work while having young children at home.

In 2015, the National Center for Education Statistics released the gender demographic make-up of the US workforce and found that men and women were equally employed in the professional workplace. They were also close to equal in the field of education for non-professors, with women accounting for slightly more of the workforce in this area. However,

when examining the rank of professor, the disparity is striking. Forty percent more men are given the rank of professor than women are, with over 100,000 more men holding a professor position than women (Holosko, Barner, & Allen, 2016). Despite the fact that men and women are equally working in the professional workforce, there is great disparity between genders when it comes to who holds the positions of power in education and academia.

Gender in Social Work Academia

McPhail (2004) and Pease (2011) argue that the same gender gap issues hold true within social work academia. Men have higher advancement rates at the graduate level of social work education and they have higher publication rates. Many decisions about curriculum content are made by men, and they most often choose male theorists, scholars, and researchers to represent the field (McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011).

Harper (1991) published a study comparing demographics of undergraduate social work professors in 1983 and 1988. She found that while some gains in female representation were made during that five-year span, women were still poorly represented at the full professor rank. Her study found that, “tenure and institutional size are important factors in gender-related disparities” (p. 58). Almost two decades later, Carter, Smith and Osteen (2017) studied differences in gender demographics between social work professors who held roles as associate professors and those who held full professor tenure-track positions. They found that there was a gender gap at all levels of faculty positions showing that men held more social work faculty positions than women did. The greatest gap was at the full professor level and the smallest gap was at the associate professor level. They pondered this difference and proposed that, “The diminished gap between men and women at the associate professor level may suggest that women get promoted to full professor less frequently than men at comparable career milestones”

(p. 1). This trend of less frequent and later promotion extends beyond just social work faculty inequity, and women are still fighting for equal access to higher positions in all areas of social work.

Holosko et al. (2016) suggest that, “Despite all efforts, it is argued that the persistence of stereotypical gender roles ascribed to women continue to make their ascension up professional ranks difficult” (p. 724), and that, “females in social work made between \$3,000 and \$8,000 less than their equivalently qualified male counterparts” (p. 725). Beyond the barriers women face in simply attaining higher positions in the social work field, they continue to face unfair compensation issues when men and women perform the same jobs.

Dahle (2012) speculates that some of the gender inequality within social work education has occurred in an attempt to validate the field. Social work is a clinical field, teaching practical skills and knowledge to be used in a clinical environment. Historically, this type of training has been ranked low in the professional hierarchy, closely related to trade school education for vocational purposes. Abstract, scientific, and theoretical knowledge derived from quantitative research and scientific inquiry is considered the pinnacle of knowledge. Dahle (2012) explains, “We still need to challenge the relationship and constant balances between scientific and experience-based knowledge forms in professional work” (p. 324). This focus on practical, scientific knowledge and skill over abstract theoretical knowledge adds to view that social work is a female profession. Fook (2002) explains that over the past century many social work models and research have had to seem more masculine to be accepted. She asserts, “It was the need to scientise our knowledge, so that it was acceptable in essentially masculinist environments, which motivated social workers to adopt models and ways of conceptualising our practical knowledge from more masculinist traditions” (p. 4). Historical practices that resulted in having men as the

face of social work education has ultimately resulted in an ever-growing gender gap that has produced a lack of power and voice for women in social work and social work education.

Gender in the Social Work Workplace

According to the 2010 and 2013 reports published by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the demographic make-up of accredited undergraduate social work programs in the U.S. has held steady; 87% of the students are female. That statistic is likely not surprising since social work is often viewed as being a female-dominated profession. In fact, Harlow (2004) suggests that social work is not even considered a legitimate profession in some general public spheres because of its perceived feminine nature. She discusses the biased view some people hold regarding social work: “Social work functions are perceived as extensions of the traditional female role of wife and mother” (p. 170). Pease (2011) concurs saying, “Social work has long been defined as a ‘female profession’ because the caretaking functions of social work are perceived to be women’s activities” (p. 407). Despite these expectations, men still maintain the majority of powerful positions within the field.

According to Perry and Cree (2003), the trend of a majority female social work student population is not likely to change soon. “Women have recently been doing better educationally than men across the board, from early school years to university, and women’s participation in the labor market has increased dramatically” (p. 381). The implications of their research are that it is highly likely that women will continue to make up the majority of social work student demographics in the future. Unfortunately, the trend of who has power in the workplace does not follow this pattern.

In contrast to public opinion, McPhail (2004) points out that women are not the only workers in social work. Most tenured social work faculty, program administrators and directors,

and policymakers are male. While the majority of front-line practitioners who are most visibly providing social work services are female, those in positions of power and influence over the profession are most often male. McPhail (2004) and Pease (2011) also point out that male social workers disproportionately held managerial positions and they were promoted to those positions earlier in their careers than their female counterparts. Not surprisingly, in the same positions, men have also consistently earned higher salaries than women have.

Since women occupy the majority of social work roles, this leads society to refer to it as a female-dominated profession, but because men actually hold more leadership positions, women have less power and voice to speak for legislation, agency policies, hiring decisions, best-practice in the field, etc. “Framing social work as a female-dominated profession hides sexism and male prejudice in social work. It is more accurate to refer to social work as a “male-dominated female majority profession” (Pease, 2011, p. 407). In essence, it is a male-dominated profession, not based on numbers, but based on power and representation.

Christie (2006) points out that due to advances in recent decades of historically disenfranchised populations, including the LGBTQ population and the continuing feminist movement, one would expect that men would start to be more comfortable working in a world where female coworkers are equals and would not feel the need to have to be at the top of the social work career ladder. Unfortunately, this has not been the case, and external social tensions and internal discomfort still exist for men to identify as social workers. Christie (2006) says, “The identity of social worker unsettles the identity of ‘man’ and puts it under scrutiny. The discourses of ‘heroic action man’ and ‘gentle-man’ represent men social workers as *different* from women, as well as from other men” (p. 407). Because the profession seems to be so gendered, it is important to men to race to the top so that they can continue to maintain their

preferred power status to prove their maleness. In an effort to better understand these issues, critical feminist theory can be used to purposefully focus on institutionalized barriers women face that are unconsciously enforced and perpetuate the status quo.

Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory is a specific lens or approach that can be used to better understand a theory or phenomena. It developed out of both critical theory and feminist thought and focuses on empowering all people, but specifically women, to become educated and aware of ingrained and perpetuated societal injustices and to actively engage in corrective action in an attempt to combat those issues. Considering its roots in social justice, educational awareness, and gender equality, critical feminist theory is an appropriate lens through which to examine social work education.

Critical theory. In the mid-1800s, Karl Marx began to illuminate the systematic processes the elite had built into society that created massive inequities and exploitation of the many by the few. He noticed that the people around him had come to accept this as normal and even contributed to the power of the institutions (e.g., universities, banks, government) causing these inequities despite the despair it ultimately brought to those outside of the institution (Marx, Engels, & Lee, 1931). Though Marx's writings did not become popular until after his death, his contributions became known as the beginnings of critical theory. Although Marx's original writings were in response to the major changes and inequalities he saw happening in the post-industrial revolution society of Western Europe, many scholars after him, even presently, continue to wrestle with the issues critical theory raises about societies.

Notably, Max Horkheimer was a central player in the development of the Frankfurt School, affiliated with the University of Frankfurt, in the early 1930s. The institute existed as a

space to explore questions of critical theory and issues of that day, including the impacts of continued improvements in technology (Bottomore, 1984). Horkheimer released many essays and books attempting to explain his critical theory philosophy. In *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), he explains that the essence of critical theory and why injustices are perpetuated boils down to the people's ability to reason and what they consider to be reasonable in their society. He wrote,

It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question of whether the purposes as such are reasonable. (p. 3)

In other words, Horkheimer was saying that people generally take for granted processes that exist and that they think they understand, but they never question (reason) the underlying purposes of those processes and whom they ultimately serve.

Tar (1985) explains that the Frankfurt School existed for scholars to use their essays and ideas to explore new developments in critical theory and reasoning. They fought the notions of the Nazis and fascism and ultimately had to leave Germany for a time to prevent persecution under Nazi rule. Nearly a century after Marx began to release his ideas and questions publically and soon after the creation of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and Habermas (another Frankfurt school scholar) continued to elaborate on Marx's work from a sociological perspective. They asked questions like, *Why* do people continue to perpetuate this society of obvious inequality? and *How* do we break the cycle by educating the public to see what is really going on so they can be a force for change (Fischer and Tepe, 2011)?

Brookfield (2005) is a major contributor to the literature surrounding applications of critical theory to the lives of adults and to adult education. He encourages adult learners and thinkers to peel back the layers of the inequities embedded in society. These inequities are found

in social and cultural interactions, in institutions, and even within individuals. Researchers using this critical lens take care to look out for embedded power, privilege, and discrimination in every situation and environment that is studied. Brookfield also attempts to provide a ray of hope in the dreariness that can come with using a critical theory lens by encouraging liberation and empowerment of teachers and learners, and he provides some practical steps to accomplish that in the classroom. Although it can seem overwhelming when all is laid bare, he believes that everyone can do something to change the inequities.

Women, racial and religious minorities, those who identify as LGBTQ, those of lower classes, and those in any category that does not fit the accepted social norm, face barriers that are frequently invisible, especially in the workplace and in educational settings. In some cases, organizations, workplaces, or educational institutions use vague anti-discrimination statements in an attempt to seem as though progress is being made in providing an equal playing field for all people, but the statistics presented earlier clearly show a different story. In light of this, Brookfield (2005) encourages everyone to engage with critical theory by becoming aware of and utilizing, “critical tasks such as learning how to perceive and challenge dominant ideology, unmask power, contest hegemony, overcome alienation, pursue liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. 2).

Feminism takes critical theory one step further in relation to how these invisible barriers impact women specifically, and how to empower women to overcome them as a collective to initiate societal and political change. Fischer and Tepe (2011) speak to this specifically and say they, “believe that critical theory... necessarily has to be feminist theory; at its very core is the hope and aim for the overcoming of societal injustice” (p. 368). Because critical theory focuses

on issues of gender, along with many other issues of inequality, it is impossible for it not to be considered alongside feminist ideology.

Feminist theory and feminism. The roots of feminism's first wave began to take hold during the women's rights movements in the early 1900s, when women were demanding fair wages, equal employment opportunities, and the right to vote. Beginning with Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Virginia Woolf, and then carried forward by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinam in the second wave, women were fighting for access to information, especially when personal decisions regarding their bodies and their sexuality were involved (Walters, 2005). These women began to demand fair treatment and the understanding that women are equally as intelligent and as capable as men were perceived to be.

Feminism is often a misunderstood movement and ideology. Butler and Weed (2011) describe it as a "movement which had to make its claims on behalf of women and which had to oppose those forms of sexual difference that produced the exclusion of women" (p. 13). In the first wave, beginning in the very late 1800's, women were fighting for basic political rights during the Women's Suffrage Movement. Gilman (1998) describes in her original writing that society was discovering that men and women were not so different; instead, they had been socialized for centuries to be different at an ultimate cost to women. This needed to be corrected through legislation to provide women with the same basic rights as men. After some major victories, the feminists were silent for a while, but Betty Friedan brought the feminist agenda to the table in her book that shattered the status quo, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which helped to kick off the second wave of feminism. Friedan's work opened the door for issues of gender inequality to be a popular culture discuss and aimed for gender neutrality (Willis, 1984). The third wave evolved in the 1990's and focused on abolishing gender stereotypes and to include

intersectionality of race, class, and culture in the movement. There is some deliberation regarding whether or not we are experiencing the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism that has relied heavily on the influencing power of social media to bring issues to light, such as the fight against workplace harassment and rape culture.

Although the feminist movement was and still is comprised of many different types of scholars, advocates, and supporters, bell hooks is well known for her writing and advocacy using feminism as a lens for educators. The feminist perspective is often misunderstood to be an anti-male perspective, which is not its purpose. hooks (2000) describes it as a “movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1). The purpose is not to begin discriminating against men, but to change society’s mindset and the way it views women socially, culturally, politically, and institutionally.

hooks (2000) explains that historically, and even currently, “males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy, from the assumption that they are superior to females and should rule over us” (p. ix). This long-established societal gender norm has resulted in institutionalized and ingrained barriers for women everywhere, especially in the workplace. However, those barriers are completely politically and socially constructed. Butler and Weed (2011) discuss that although there is a difference between males and females biologically, most of the differences that people assume exist (outside of anatomical differences) are, “produced through historical and cultural means, indissociable from power, and so not only or exclusively a biological difference” (p. 13). The authors are explaining that the assumption that women can do less and have less to offer than men has been produced historically from those in power, who are usually men.

It is important to note that men can hold feminist values and support the goal of striving towards gender equality, just as women can be anti-feminists who do not support it. One goal of feminism is to educate the public to make people aware of these ingrained gender norm ideologies and societal assumptions. More than this, feminism is about changing thinking and taking actions such that the barriers that women face are eliminated. As this ideology has been explored in the literature, some authors and researchers are combining the ideas of critical theory, which advocates for breaking down barriers for *every* disadvantaged group, and feminism/feminist theory, which focuses specifically on issues facing women. Vasilaki (2016) notes in her writing on the current politics of feminism that, “Recent years have experienced a remarkable opening of feminism toward new understandings of the feminine self and feminist consciousness through the lens of a particular critical angle; through the critique of secularism as cultural and political ethos” (p. 103). Having always been an advocate for equal opportunity and anti-discrimination for women, feminism is becoming more well-known and more broadly accepted in popular culture and can broaden its definitions to include critical theory critiques of societal institutions and the role they play in perpetuating these issues. This combination of feminist and critical theory and the historically commonly accepted, but contested, societal norm that women are perceived as being weaker, less intelligent, and less capable than men has given rise to a very specific version of feminist theory: critical feminist theory.

Critical feminist theory. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was writing about critical feminism over a century ago, although she did not label it that, and her books have continued to be re-produced and re-published into present day. Her writing explained that she took from Marx’s economic ideology that humans are centered on production and that most oppression flourishes there, but instead of oppression only stemming from economic class it also stemmed from gender

differences (Gilman, 1998). This was one of the first adaptations of Marx's critical theory to incorporate feminist ideology.

Unfortunately, for half of a century this emphasis on gender equality died down, and was not re-invigorated until the second wave of feminism began in the 1960's. Not long after, in the 1980s, author and historian Joan W. Scott (1986) began to publish essays about the importance of a critical understanding of gender in society. Writing about Joan W. Scott, Butler and Weed (2011) explain that, "...she sought to establish a specifically *critical* feminism, that is, one that would *not* take normative renditions of gender for granted and that maintained a historical skepticism with respect to established binary modes of conceptualizing men and women" (p. 21). Scott expanded on Marx's critical theory and Perkins Gilman's adaptation of it to focus on gender and was one of the first published authors to use a labelled critical feminist perspective in writing. Critical feminism seeks to correct injustices and barriers that women face while keeping in mind that all of the societal assumptions that exist have been socially and historically constructed and are deeply imbedded in society's subconscious.

Agassi (1995) was one of the first scholars to openly express that feminist thought should be viewed with a sense of critical rationalism. Feminism and critical theory were not often mentioned together at that time, but Agassi argued that they should be, because critical thought informs feminism in a complimentary way. She rejects the existence of an incompatibility between feminism and critical thought, naming many reasons, including its importance of: "class and its impact on discrimination against women in family, household, workplace and politics" (p. 159). Essentially, for Agassi, any person promoting feminist views should be using critical theory as a way of understanding how the problems originated and what can be done to combat them.

Unfortunately, critical feminism is a relatively new lens through which to view the world, and some researchers are resistant to it. For example, McLennan (1995) claimed to use a critical feminist perspective when examining quantitative forms of research, especially in the hard sciences. He explains his understanding that feminism would view certain experiments, research, and the way findings are interpreted and presented as having a male bias, because historically, men have been the scientists, but that some of the hard data they obtained in their research is objective (not influenced by gender or other factors) and can remain intact. He suggests that, “feminists must openly abandon the quest for better ‘neutral’ knowledge, replacing it with a clear emancipatory commitment to knowledge from the standpoint of women’s experience” (p. 392). It seems clear that McLennan is continuing to perpetuate some of the ingrained assumptions that caused the need for critical feminism in the first place, considering his suggestion that feminists would think that some forms of data that is collected could be unbiased and also the suggestion that there would be a need to rid of all scientific rationality just because men are involved in it. More realistically, feminists and critical feminists would encourage the need for readers and researchers themselves to beware of all researcher/scientist bias, including class, gender, religion, race, etc., that influences their work.

Critical feminist theory is needed within the realm of social work to understand the continued gender inequality that both practitioners and students experience. The gender disparities within the social work field and educational environments directly affect undergraduate social work students, especially during their senior year field practicum requirement. The gender statistics presented previously show that it is likely that predominantly female classes of undergraduate social work students are more often being taught by men in the social work classroom and supervised by men in the social work field. There is nothing

inherently wrong with a female student being taught by male professors or field supervisors, but issues of gender, power and their impact should be considered for these female social work students. Additionally, female professors or female agency supervisors may unknowingly be perpetuating the societal status quo that does not value the promotion of women with the social work field.

Brookfield (2005) discusses how hegemonic ideology (ingrained thoughts and beliefs regarding power and privilege in a society) perpetuates the status quo. This can play out in scenarios where wealthy, rich, white men continue to hold the positions of prestige and power. Unless the current views about and trends within the social work workplace and classroom are challenged, students will experience a field in which female social workers are expected to be front-line providers, rarely promoted to higher administration/management or professor positions within academia nor will they hold other positions of power. Critical feminist theory takes the foundations of critical theory and feminist theory and combines them to have a more thorough lens through which to examine research, literature, and phenomena related to the social work classroom and the social work field.

Critical Feminist Theory in Adult Education

More commonly found in adult education literature than in social work education literature, critical feminist theory easily lends itself as an understanding of adult education because of adult education's roots in empowerment and emancipation. Paulo Freire, one of the founding fathers of contemporary adult education, focused on learning as a form of emancipating adults from present circumstances that may be barriers to them, such as illiteracy, or lack of vocational training (Freire, 1970). Due to its foundational nature of relying on nonformal learning opportunities in easily accessible settings, like homes or local schools, the very essence

of the availability of adult education has provided more opportunity for women. Historically (until the last half-century) women have been viewed as caretakers and homemakers. Despite the enormity of that task, Cunningham (1992) explains that it homemaking or child-rearing is often not viewed as being work. Also due to that duty, husbands have historically been tasked with providing for the household, so the few women who worked outside of the home were not paid the same as men because they were not the primary breadwinners. This, and many other reasons, supported the gender pay gap that still exists today (Cunningham, 1992).

The availability of nonformal learning environments meant that women could learn new skills without attracting unwanted attention and without facing institutional barriers that were meant to keep them at home. The beginning of nonformal adult education allowed women to engage in new experiences, share their own knowledge, and learn new things together. This core belief of inclusion and equitable access to education is a value that adult education has carried with it to present day. Because of this intensive focus on emancipation and equity of education for all, critical feminist theory can be readily used as a framework for adult educators who hold those same values.

Many adult educators and researchers have made strong connections between feminist pedagogy in general (Tisdell, 1998) and critical feminist theory specifically (Carpenter, 2010) to adult education. Critical feminist theory provides a key connection between general learning theories that have been reformulated to fit the needs of adults and the foundational values of adult education that center around emancipation, equity, and equality of learning for all adults. Carpenter (2010) explains, “The primary theoretical task is then to rearticulate the central relations of adult learning theory (the individual, the social, and experience), which necessitates a dialectical formation of social difference and oppression” (p. 1). Hopefully, the continued

incorporation of critical feminist theory in adult education will re-evaluate understandings of adult learning in light of the social difference and oppression that continually exists for many adults, especially women.

There is an issue within most realms of literature, adult education included, of the marginalized voice to be silent. For example, Malcolm (2012) explains that, “Despite feminist engagement with the problem of women’s positioning, very little has been written from the perspective of those at the bottom end of the hierarchy” (p. 253-254). Often the voices that are heard via academic writing are those of prominence within the field, and specifically because they have achieved enough prominence to be heard can make questionable whether or not they speak for the marginalized. A feminist perspective on adult education advocates for many other avenues for voices to be heard including storytelling, art, dance, creative writing, music, gesture, nonverbal expression, and general discourse. Recognizing other available outlets provides opportunity for many more adult learners to express themselves. Tisdell (1998) explains, “While silence can indeed be a lack of voice or a lack of power, it is often not that, especially for those cultural groups that have an appreciation for silence...” (p. 151).

Intersections of Critical, Feminist, and Critical Feminist Theories in Social Work

Using the term *critical feminism* is a new concept in social work literature. At the time of this literature search, two empirical studies (Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, & Wahab, 2013; Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015) and one conceptual piece (Gringeri & Roche, 2010) specifically name this framework in the social work field, and all three will be discussed below. A search of the psychology and sociology literature yielded similar results. The most relevant sociological article that exists is a conceptual piece, published in Canada by Marshall (1988), which discusses the current views of feminism in sociology. He argues that critical theory should be utilized to

better understand these views, as they do not adequately incorporate the role of unconsciously, institutionalized values and processes in continued gender inequality:

While gender has not been a focus of critical theory, it is implicated in its central themes, and provides a ready illustration of the need to reframe the traditional Marxian problematic to more adequately understand complex forms of domination that cannot be explained by the capital/wage relationship. It is suggested that work in the tradition of critical theory may be instructive in reconstructing socialist feminist theory to articulate more clearly the role of agency in both reproducing and transforming structures of domination. (p. 208)

Since then, the idea of feminist theory incorporating a more critical element that takes into account systematic oppression and marginalization (critical feminist theory) has occurred to many authors of conceptual pieces. For example, Nayak (2015) discussed using race and gender inequities to support activism as a black feminist, which while utilizing a foundation of critical theory, but did not name her approach as critical feminist. Many other conceptual works (e.g., Creese, McLaren, Tiger, & Pulkingham, 2009; Thorne, 2006) discuss using critical feminist theory as a sociological lens, but no empirical literature was found utilizing it by name. However, as Davis (2008) suggests, incorporating critical theory and the feminist perspective allows for, “the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” (p. 67), which could make an important contribution to the social work field. To discover whether a critical feminist perspective exists within the field of social work, literature related to critical theory and feminist theory were also reviewed.

Critical and feminist theories in social work. More broad than critical feminist theory, critical theory and feminism and their relationships to social work have been explored more

extensively in the conceptual literature in the social work field. Keenan (2004), Makinnon (2009), Herz and Johansson (2012), and Morley and MacFarlane (2012) argue that, philosophically, understanding critical theory could play an important role in the effectiveness of social workers. Social workers using this theoretical perspective to listen, observe, and intervene with clients may obtain a more well-rounded understanding of clients' lives and the various societal factors that may have contributed to their circumstances. Beyond enhancing social workers' skills with clients, this critical perspective allows social workers to actively work against institutionalized barriers and assumptions that they may subconsciously, or somewhat consciously, perpetuate within their fields. Dominelli and MacLeod (1989) discuss the importance of critical theory and feminist perspectives in social work considering that,

Social work is a state agency in a society where the state is underwritten by vested interests in maintaining deep-rooted, class-based inequalities. Therefore, it is not surprising that social workers operate to maintain this status quo in various ways.” (p. 103)

Without these perspectives, it will be difficult for social workers to get to the deep roots of client issues.

Similarly, feminist theory has been explored within the context of social work in some of the conceptual literature in an attempt to better understand and evaluate gender issues, especially patriarchal and capitalistic gender role expectations related to work, education, and marriage (Zhang, 2019). It was also used to encourage social workers to examine the ways they advocated for clients to make sure they were not speaking for them if they did not understand their clients' individual experiences and life circumstances (Forcey & Nash, 1998). Sands and Nuccio's (1992) conceptual piece addressed how a feminist approach could allow practitioners and clients

to celebrate and appreciate differences and grow from that place of appreciation and understanding.

It is also important for educators and practitioners to understand the binary nature of much of the preceding social work research, literature, and theory that informs today's practices (Sand & Nuccio, 1992). Most researchers and theorists utilized in the field when social work was just beginning to be recognized as a legitimate career, but even still today, are male, so it is important to correct the gender imbalance that exists within literature in the field. In a similar, but also dated, conceptual piece, researchers were encouraged to incorporate a feminist stance in social work research in an attempt to include all voices and make sure no participants are marginalized (Swigonski, 1994). More recently, Gringeri, Wahab, and Anderson-Nathe (2010) reviewed over 50 empirical pieces of social work literature that claimed to incorporate a feminist perspective and found it lacking in depth and breadth. In those articles, they found that the,

Social work offerings present a somewhat limited view of feminisms and what feminist thought has to contribute to the broader field of feminist social science. By defining feminism as “by, about, and for women” and accepting and reinforcing essential distinctions between female and male, much of the research in social work has limited the exploration and discussion of the complex and finely nuanced realities in which people live, work, and interrelate. (p. 402)

In essence, the authors suggest a limited scope of feminist theory was portrayed in the literature, only focusing on the binary of male/female, when there are many other facets that affect clients that should be considered during both assessment and treatment. None of the pieces mentioned including critical component.

Herz and Johanssen's (2012) conceptual piece critiques the current context in which social workers' skills are viewed, which emphasizes individuation and fragmentation of client situations, so that they can be assessed as individuals and treated for their specific needs. However, this approach does not take into account the institutionalized injustices that clients may face in the workplace and in society, as a whole, that may be affecting their functioning. Social work practice would do better to appreciate the whole picture of both seen and unseen barriers in clients' lives in order to provide the most effective interventions. This could be achieved by emphasizing a critical and/or feminist lens, starting at the beginning of social work education programs and being continuously reinforced throughout students' time in school and in the field. Although a core value of social work emphasizes social justice (CSWE, 2015), per Pease (2011) it is not supported enough through the teaching of critical perspectives in the classrooms.

Pease (2011) also notes that feminism is not often used as a lens through which to view social work education and that gender inequality in the field is not discussed in the classroom. In her conceptual piece, Pease argues that social work education,

is not always effective in assisting male students to acknowledge their structural gender privilege and how this privilege reproduces the oppression of women. Male students' defensive responses to feminist content do not bode well for the future of the gender-conscious male social workers in the profession. (p. 409)

Overall, then, conceptual literature appears to share a consensus that critical theory and feminist perspectives should be used in the field of social work as whole, but, more specifically, for understanding issues related to social work education, as well (Herz & Johanssen, 2012; Pease, 2011).

One branch of feminism, postmodern feminism, utilizes deconstruction in an attempt to unearth marginalized voices, especially in texts (Latting, 1995). The deconstruction strand of feminism is similar to critical feminist theory in its attempt to uncover the voices of those who have been systematically oppressed. Interestingly, Latting (1995) discusses deconstruction in an effort to better understand Sands and Nuccio's (1992) conversation around feminism and social work, as described earlier in this section. Latting is concerned that Sands and Nuccio's writing may continue to perpetuate some ingrained issues regarding oppression, since they are not explicit in their discussion of institutionalized barriers related to gender marginalization. The movement of some threads of feminist theory towards purposefully considering the oppressed and the oppressor works directly towards a critical feminist perspective.

Critical feminist theory and social work. Some researchers are utilizing a critical feminist perspective in social work studies, but they do not make the distinction between the traditional feminist perspectives and critical feminist theory in their research. This distinction is important so the author and the reader are both aware of the point of view from which information is understood in the research. For example, Eyal-Lubing and Krumer-Nevo (2016) published an empirical qualitative study that examined twelve feminist social worker's self-described feminist social work practice approach in Israel. In their analysis of these social workers' practice, the researchers take into account, "analysis of welfare services as structures of oppression" (p. 245). They call their theoretical perspective a "radical" analysis, but they are utilizing a critical feminist perspective, as it is defined in this dissertation, to understand the barriers social work clients face in service delivery. The authors point out that this perspective is a novel one, but that it is an emerging practice perspective in social work. In fact, the social workers who participated in the study felt strongly that eliminating oppressive and marginalizing

barriers for their clients was central to their work. Similarly, Saulnier (2000) uses the phrase “radical feminist” to describe ways to empower social workers running groups for women. Her qualitative study interviewed 24 social workers who were purposefully running groups with a feminist perspective. Saulnier (2000) explains, “Radical feminists argue that individual women’s experiences of injustice and miseries that women think of as personal problems are actually political issues, grounded in power imbalances” (p. 20). Only two of the 24 group facilitators discussed utilizing this perspective. “They described barriers to women’s attempts to be strong and powerful and they saw a need to help women resist those constraints” (Saulnier, 2000, p. 20). Both of the perspectives utilized in these studies (Eyal-Lubing & Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Saulnier, 2000) are critical feminist perspectives, they are just not called such in the literature.

Turner and Maschi (2015) explain that feminist theories traditionally examine role expectations, status, and power differences related to gender, like patriarchal underpinnings to societal expectations of women. In her conceptual work, Turner uses empowerment theory, which could also be classified as a critical lens, to incorporate the inclusion of an understanding of, “personal, interpersonal, and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation” (p. 152). Ultimately, this is critical feminist view; but it is not called that. It is important to bring together these perspectives and label them as critical feminist perspectives to understanding social work practice so that critical feminism becomes a more broadly recognized and utilized lens within the social work field.

Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, and Wahab (2013) present case studies from their own social work practice experience and discuss the need for further developing and incorporating critical feminism as a lens for understanding in social work:

Despite the congruence between critical feminist values and the cardinal values of the social work profession, feminist research in social work has lagged behind its feminist cousins in the social sciences, particularly in terms of critical uses of theory, reflexivity, and the troubling of binaries. (p. 277)

The authors are clear in making connections between the values of social work, such as respecting individuals' dignity, and the incorporation of critical feminist theory as a lens to better understand clients. Although crucial to understanding a holistic perspective of the social work field and social work clients individually, critical feminist theory is only beginning to be applied as a lens to understand social work.

Although critical feminist theory is rarely mentioned by name in social work literature, Krumer-Nevo and Komem (2015) published a study using it as the framework for social workers working with adolescent girls. They led a workshop where twenty-two social work practitioners were introduced to critical feminist theory as a way to understand and empower the girls they were working with in groups. They noted that the critical feminist lens is unfamiliar to social workers and that some of the discourse related to inequality and barriers is sometimes seen as being counterintuitive to their value of having a strengths-based approach that focuses on the positive aspects of situations. The authors examined whether or not this lens was helpful for the social workers to use while working with this population and found that, although the lens was helpful for understanding the situations of their client population, it was so new that social workers had a more difficult time understanding it and applying it.

For example, instead of only focusing on the individual's abilities and strengths, using a critical feminist lens would encourage social workers to consider an individual's environment, family structure, workplace, and the historical and imbedded inequalities that exist within those

systems, especially focusing on issues of gender. Krumer-Nevo and Komem (2015) explain the importance of understanding the, “structural intersection of social categories, such as gender, class and ethnicity, which lies behind inequality, along with the need to acknowledge women’s life experiences, voices and knowledge” (p. 1190). Ideally, if social workers were encouraged to continue to use this lens more often and earlier in their education and practice, they may be able to overcome their initial misunderstandings of the theory and use it to their and their clients’ benefit.

In Gringeri and Roche’s (2010) conceptual piece they emphasize, “without critical feminist voices that highlight the ways in which inequalities in power and social structures distort gender, many people experience limited access to opportunities and a reduced potential for development” (p. 337). The authors discuss that it seems as though practitioners explore issues that women face only at a surface level, and do not critically analyze the underlying societal infrastructure that supports ingrained beliefs, assumptions, and values that oppress women. They call for more discourse related to critical feminist issues in social work. This would apply to both social workers as practitioners and academics, as well as for their treated client base.

A critical feminist theoretical framework is more common in the teacher education literature, especially in the fields of history and social studies. Schmeichel (2015) mentions that the lens, “encourages responsiveness to positionality, situatedness, identity, location, and history—the same kinds of understandings upon which the implementation of multiple perspectives in history education relies” (p. 2). Brady and Kanpol (2000) went so far as to suggest that, “It is not unrealistic for teacher educators to be cognizant of *and* held responsible for knowing, acknowledging and acting on injustices in our society that schools reproduce as a part of

hegemonic, patriarchal structure” (p. 47). Overall, critical feminist theory aligns with understanding the history and evolution of education, and it is suggested that teachers are responsible for critically examining the information that is presented to them and that they present to their students. The same is true for adult education (Malcolm, 2012; Tisdell, 1998) and higher education (Parson, 2016).

Critical feminist theory is an important lens to use in the social work field in order to better understand the deeply imbedded, subconscious, and institutionalized injustices that are perpetuated daily, specifically in regards to gender in social work. Some researchers are using this lens, but not calling it critical feminism. It is important to label this approach and replicate it within the literature so that practitioners and researchers can become more familiar with it. Although some researchers are already using this lens, it is important to integrate an acceptance and understanding of this perspective specifically as a critical feminist perspective in an attempt to maintain uniformity in both the literature and in practitioner understanding of the perspective.

Undergraduate Social Work Students and Adult Education

Age as a determining factor of adulthood impacts how research with undergraduate social work students participants should be approached and understood. Research that spans a large spectrum of topics and is focused on adult learners often establishes the age of 25 as the age of adulthood for the participants (Kasworm, 2010; Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016). This is especially true in the field of adult education often due to the emphasis that the field places on the importance of adults’ prior experiences and the ability to develop specific learning skills to achieve individual goals. This assumption started fifty years ago when Malcolm Knowles (1975) began to discuss that there were key differences between adult learners and children learners; mainly that they are self-directed, they come with a variety of experiences, and they are there and

ready to learn because they want to and are intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1975; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Although these differences are true between children (K-12) and adults, these differences are not necessarily true between college students and adult learners.

The traditional undergraduate college/university student is between the ages of 18 and 22 years old and is not considered an adult because of the assumption that the majority of those students do not have many independent prior life experiences through which they filter their learning. In fact, Kasworm (2010) explicitly explains that undergraduate adults were at minimum age 25 in her study of adult learners. In light of that definition, most of my dissertation demographic (fourth year undergraduate social work students) would not be considered adults.

The Undergraduate Student Adult

Fortunately, many others believe that becoming an adult happens along a continuum and a specific age does not necessarily determine whether someone has entered adulthood. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) and Jarvis (2010) both discuss different theorists' approaches to viewing a person as an adult. Many developmental theorists have developed a timeline of life events that they believe occur during the transformation of the adolescent to an adult. Age is not necessarily the precursor to determining adulthood, but instead adult responsibilities are, such as maintaining a job, a household, a family, etc., which nontraditional and traditionally-aged college students may be experiencing alike. Balancing responsibilities such as work, family, and school are well-documented concerns for nontraditional students (MacDonald, 2018; Ross-Gordon, 2011), but may also be applicable to traditionally-aged students.

Erik Erikson discussed different stages of life that one moves through during life's continuum and many years ago, Maslow presented his now-famous hierarchy of human needs that determine a person's ability to learn, grow, and prosper in society (Jarvis, 2010). Although

there are average age ranges that can be applied to this growth, especially to Erikson's stages of development, there is not a hard line that a person crosses to become an adult. Decades of conversations and debates citing biological, social, and neurological development illustrate the problematic nature of placing a number on adulthood.

Bio-social factors of adulthood. Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) and Hogan and Astone (1986) specifically address an important factor that plays into entering adulthood: cultural socialization. Many cultures determine that a person has reached adulthood depending on certain biological or social factors. Biologically, in some cultures girls may be considered women when they have their first episode of menses, and boys may be considered men when they begin to experience other milestones of puberty like voice changes and growing body hair. Socially, in some cultures persons as young as ten or twelve could be considered adults, because they have to work to provide for their families or may already be married and bearing children.

In the U. S., the legal age of an adult is 18 years old, but sometimes persons younger than 18 are forced into situations in which they are providers for their families, caretakers for their own children or their siblings, or living on their own and meeting their own needs. Alternatively, some persons who turn 18 are not as able to care for themselves or make reasonable decisions. Some research regarding the time when learners enter adulthood focuses less on a specific age threshold and more on the idea of individual agency and autonomy. The assumption is that a person becomes an adult when he or she has the ability legally, socially, and financially to make his or her own decisions. If that person is not able to do so because he or she is bound financially, legally, or culturally to another person (usually the parents or guardians) then he or she would not be considered to be an autonomous adult (Franklin-Hall, 2013; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016).

Neurological factors of adulthood. The age of adulthood has been a debate in the realm of neuroscience for many years. Brain scans can show the development of the brain over time, and Johnson, Blum, and Geid (2009) argue that scans have shown that the brain is continuing to develop as adults enter their early-to-mid-twenties. This causes scientists to question whether or not 18 can really be considered the age of maturity. Other brain mappers (Stephanou, et al., 2016) confirm that in a study of 15-25 year olds, the younger participants reacted more often based on emotion because their regulatory processing system had not yet matured as compared to the older participants. Despite the evidence, the debate continues, because there is still much about the brain that scientists do not know.

Arnett (2000) proposed a term called emerging adulthood that describes the gradual transition of adolescents to adults that usually occurs between the ages of 18 and 25. Arnett says that up until the age of 18, most peers are doing the same things: living at home, going to middle and high school, and experiencing puberty. He says,

In our time, it makes sense to define adolescence as ages 10-18. Young people in this age group have in common that they live with their parents, are experiencing the physical changes of puberty, are attending secondary school, and are part of a school-based peer culture. None of this remains normative after age 18... Age 18 also marks a variety of legal transitions, such as being allowed to vote and sign legal documents. (p. 476)

Arnett (2000) is alluding to the fact that, often after the age of 18, individuals' lives can look very different and occur across a broad spectrum. Some stay at home and go to college. Others are forced to leave the home immediately and work fulltime, or they get married, leave their homes, and start families. There is a wide range of dependence on the nuclear family that occurs after adolescents turn 18, which makes the issue of age determining adulthood very subjective.

Thus, it is argued that many undergraduate students could be considered adult learners, since many of them live on their own, are financially independent, are legally able to make their own decisions, etc. Those over the age of 18 are automatically qualified as adults in the U. S.' legal system. In light of the factors presented, it is impossible to only include persons above the age of 25 as adult learners, because every person's life experiences and learning situations vary so greatly. Some people meet what are considered to be adult stages of development when they are young teenagers, while others still struggle to meet them when they are far beyond the age of 25.

Trend of older undergraduate students. One additional point to note in this discussion is the trend over the past few decades of an increasing nontraditional undergraduate student demographic (Graham & Donaldson, 1999). With the more recent availability of online learning and some university campuses changing the structure of their course availability to make evening and weekend classes available for students who have families and/or who are working fulltime, many adults are able to either return to school to finish a degree or pursue an undergraduate degree for the first time. In 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) noted that throughout the country, around 11 million students were under the age of 25, but the fastest growing enrollment age were those over 25, which accounted for over eight million students (NCES, 2017). In relationship to this dissertation demographic, potentially one-third to half of the undergraduate social work students participating in their senior year field practicum could be older than the traditional college student. It would be a mistake to assume that any research involving an undergraduate student population would only include students of a traditional college age.

Unfortunately, there are not very many social work programs in the central Pennsylvania area, so the participants available for this study may be limited. Because of this, for the purpose of my dissertation I will not be excluding participants under the age of 25 in an attempt to include as many participants as possible due to a potential lack of graduates who meet inclusion criteria. Specific participant selection will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

Little social work literature addresses the issue of gender inequality for students in the social work field or in social work academia, and especially not female students who are navigating a required field practicum experience and likely are witnessing the power inequality that exists within those organizations and institutions. Some suggestions and solutions have been offered by a few scholars in an attempt to combat this issue. Mallinger, Starks, and Tarter (2017) suggest that this be addressed both within social work academia and within the social work workplace environment. Within the workplace, all social workers, but perhaps most importantly field instructors who are training female social work students, should be advocating for the elimination of sexism and gender discrimination in their organizations and be advocates for equal opportunities.

Mallinger et al. (2017) support what Smith (1986) says regarding social work education. Current curriculum and instruction reinforces gender norms by elevating male professors and male theorists in the field. Pursuing new approaches and new literature from a female or feminist perspective would go a long way to show female social work students that they can strive for more. Social work educators and schools of social work should work to foster discussions about sexism and gender discrimination in an effort to increase education and awareness of the issues. They also suggest that programs should nurture leadership skills to empower students to try to

break down barriers. In both the educational and workplace environments, these social work students should be encouraged and empowered to go beyond the currently expected gender norms.

Freedberg (2009) further encourages teaching about feminism and using a feminist perspective. Her work focuses on client-worker relationship from feminist perspective, but can be adapted for the student-supervisor relationship. She discusses that in the current worldview, men are criticized for their feelings or if they emphasize the importance of relationships. She argues that the feminist view of relationships encourages their development because supportive relationships can empower people (in this case, the student). This lens would empower male social work students to reject gender norms about men and relationships and encourage them to embrace healthy feelings and relationships with women in the classroom and the workplace. Freedberg (2009) encourages that, "The internalized gendered world is not fixed, and the desire for connection can cut across gender lines" (p. 29). There is hope that we can live in a world where men and women are valued equally.

A look at these suggestions from the critical feminist view calls to the surface a major barrier: The ones who would be responsible for implementing these changes would likely be men given their prominence in positions of status and power. Nevertheless, hope could be seen in grassroots efforts of front-line social workers, regardless of gender, raising awareness in the workplace, and in social work professors who attempt to adjust their syllabi or add discussion into their classroom time to accommodate some of these suggestions. Like most large-scale changes, these would most likely need to be implemented from the ground-up and could move slowly, but better to move slowly than not to move at all.

Clearly, further research is needed in this area. Gaps in the literature include a lack of critical and/or feminist theory in social work curricula and classroom. Possibly more important than studying how to address these issues in the classroom, ample room remains for research on the issues that arise for female social work students when they are supervised by male field instructors, and the converse view as well (issues that arise for male field instructors when they supervise female social work students). Findings from studies like these would greatly increase the knowledge base on these issues and provide implications and suggestions for male field supervisors, female social work students, and social work educators in the future.

In summary, the gender gap seen in the social work workforce and education hierarchy mirrors the gap that continues to exist in all education and society in general. Unfortunately, since such a high proportion of social work students are female, the fact that men hold a majority of powerful positions within educational institutions and workplaces leaves a lot of room for issues to arise both within the social work classroom, educational institutions as a whole, and during the mandated field practicum experience in the social work curriculum. Gaps in the social work literature provide space for researchers to explore what issues are most pervasive for female social work students, what is being done to address those issues, and to trial interventions in an attempt to combat them.

My dissertation research will contribute to the existing literature by providing a more in-depth exploration of social work students' experiences and interactions with the gender gap during their education and field practicum experiences. My findings and discussion will bring to light current issues that female social work students are experiencing in these spaces as well as any effective interventions they encountered that could contribute to the ongoing conversation in this area. Learning more about their wants and needs during their field practicum experience will

also allow me to theorize what interventions could be used to combat the issues they are facing. In light of connections early supporting the inclusion of undergraduate students as emerging adults in adult education, this research will also contribute to adult education literature related to experiential learning and communities of practice.

In addition, this research will discuss the outcome of social work students' field practicum experience, and how it prepared them, or did not prepare them, to enter the workforce when they graduated, from their own perspectives. It is important that schools of social work and the fourth year field practicum experiences are preparing students to enter the social work workforce successfully, and that the students and employers feel confident and competent in students' abilities at graduation. If this is not the case, this research could lend insight into interventions and implications for program development. Furthermore, this research will incorporate a critical feminist perspective in understanding social work student experiences, which has not been commonly done to this point and would be greatly beneficial to begin to incorporate into the field. Lastly, it will add to the critical feminist theory literature that could be applied to field practicum experiences in any field.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation?
2. What are their perceptions of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences?

This chapter will provide an overview of qualitative research methodology in general and will include details regarding the specific methodology used for this study. It will review the research design, data collection, and methods of analyzing the data. Lastly, considerations of the researcher's positionality and issues of dependability and verification will also be discussed and conclude with a chapter summary.

The Qualitative Research Paradigm

The assumption of qualitative research design is that all information and experiences are unique to the specific person who experiences it; an absolute truth does not exist, but rather is socially constructed in light of people's experiences and perceptions. Qualitative research does not seek to find an answer that can be ascribed to all members of a certain population. Instead, it seeks to learn and understand more about how a person or group of people makes meaning of an experience, to share similarities and differences that arise within that research study, and to

discuss the implications of these findings for the field or the populations being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research examines the particular in depth and does not attempt to be generalizable based on a large sample, but rather seeks to ascertain how individuals make meaning in situations that are contextually dependent (Creswell, 2014).

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Darlington and Scott (2002) explain, “Qualitative research is not new. Historians have always analysed documentary evidence...and through oral history methods have added in-depth interviewing to their repertoire in recent decades” (p. 2). Creswell (2014) outlines specific characteristics of qualitative research that set it apart from other methodologies. First, qualitative research often occurs in a natural setting, and observations and interviews do not occur within a lab. Typically, information is gleaned by observing participants or talking with them in the setting in which the phenomenon of interest is occurring or within an informal environment that is comfortable to the participant. Additionally, there are often multiple sources from which the researcher is looking to glean information, including interviews, observations, artifacts, documents, and media, to name a few.

Researchers often utilize inductive data analysis methods, in which researchers collect large amounts of data and then organize it into more manageable and understandable pieces. “Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories and themes from the bottom up by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). Questions and understandings may change throughout the process as the previously collected data informs the newly collected data, and vice versa. “...the initial plan for the research cannot be tightly prescribed, and some or all of phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). It is wise for a

researcher to have a plan of approach to the research, but to be open to new questions and new information becoming known throughout the experience.

Qualitative Research Approaches

As noted by Patton (2015), “Research aims to... contribute to knowledge. Research findings describe how the world works and why it works as it does” (p. 18). Within the qualitative research paradigm, there are many different ways studies can be structured in an attempt to obtain findings that inform a researcher’s purpose. The most common research designs are basic interpretive, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry and case study. More recently, qualitative action research, critical research, and arts-based research have also been included as qualitative designs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), as well as the interest in mixed methods, which includes both qualitative and quantitative research designs.

Basic interpretive studies are useful to obtain a general understanding of how people interpret their experiences and how they make meaning of their experiences. This is a common type of study, since researchers do not often discuss a particular type of qualitative study that they are doing, but rather focus on the fact that they are examining how participants make meaning. Phenomenology is the research design that aims at understanding the particular essence of a phenomenon usually by conducting interviews. Researchers consider their own background, experiences, and biases towards the research (called *epoché*) and then bracket out those thoughts, or temporarily put those thoughts aside and attempt to discover a phenomenon for what it really is without the researcher’s biased understanding (Flick, 2014).

Phenomenological studies usually focus on individuals; case studies, on the other hand, provide an in-depth description of a specific, bounded system examined over a period of time. For example, a researcher may do a case study of one higher education class to see how group

dynamics unfold over time, or an analysis of a particular organization. An ethnographic approach to research requires complete submersion in the culture of interest. Grounded theory is another form of qualitative research that is specifically designed for theory development in an attempt to contribute to the theoretical understanding of a phenomenon in a specific field. After data collection, when the researcher engages in data analysis, he or she is looking for patterns to emerge that will allow the researcher to shed light on new theory (Flick, 2014). Due to the lack of research and literature that exists on this topic, there was not enough information that could be used to narrow the research focus enough to take advantage of other qualitative research approaches, so a basic interpretive study design was most appropriate for this study.

Research Design

As noted, different types of research designs are available and helpful for researchers to obtain different types of information depending on the research goals. Considering all options and considering that little literature exists on this topic, I felt it would be most beneficial to do a basic interpretive study to explore the experiences of recently-graduated undergraduate social work students. This approach allowed me to cast a wide net for any information that could be relevant to the social work field, but specifically in relation to the field practicum.

Basic Interpretive Design

A basic interpretive approach to qualitative research does not use a specific framework to collect data or disseminate findings. It is a form of qualitative research that questions how people make sense of their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this design in which, “the primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (p. 25). Usually, this approach is used when a researcher is in the beginning phases of exploring a research question with a specific population to see what information and themes become known.

Qualitative researchers are often more concerned with learning about the process of participants' making meaning of their experiences, rather than the final product or outcome. Creswell (2014) discusses the implications of examining how participants as individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. He explains, "These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas" (p. 8). The goal of the researcher is to understand experiences through the participants' perspectives. They put together common themes and discuss differences regarding specific experiences within their research, and open themselves up to knowledge that is ever-changing and should be treated as subjective. Rather than starting with a theory and testing it, data is collected and theories or patterns emerge from inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2014).

To do this, qualitative researchers use multiple sources of data collection to inform their findings. Some of the most common data collection instruments used in qualitative research include: observations of participants at a field site with field notes taken by the researcher; participant interviews; focus groups; and artifacts and documents, such as reports, papers, journals, emails, media, etc., to provide additional information related to the topic (Creswell, 2014). Individual, semi-structured interviews and documents/artifacts, such as student handbooks, student/agency learning contracts, and online websites of the schools of social work were used in this study in an attempt to learn more about how recently-graduated, bachelor-level social workers feel their field practicum experience prepared them to work after graduation. The specific data collection and analysis methods for this study will be described in detail in later sections of this chapter.

Background of the Researcher

Qualitative research relies solely on the researcher as the instrument of data collection and interpretation, which means that the researcher has a responsibility to attempt to understand the data and present accurate, unaltered findings to the best of his or her ability. Although researchers are imperfect and biased, it is impossible to eliminate that obstacle. Instead, researchers should be open with their readers and identify what those biases and shortcomings might be that could interact with their understanding and interpretation of the data. “While subjectivity is not the focus of most qualitative studies, it is important for researchers to deal with their own potential influences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17). Creswell (2014) encourages researchers to focus on reflexivity and holistic account portrayal, and, therefore, researchers need to account for their background, experiences, and biases that impact their understanding and analysis of the findings of the study. Additionally, researchers should attempt to provide a holistic account of the situation to the best of their abilities, but they need to acknowledge that the account is always presented and understood through the lens of their own experiences. In an attempt to maintain transparency and authenticity as a researcher, my own influences will be illuminated here.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I shared a story that occurred during one of my social work field placements, in which I had a male supervisor who favored my male student counterpart over me. Although I did not realize it at the time, that experience would shape my future passion for social work students to have positive experiences during their field practicums that are not hindered by marginalization or disinterest on the part of the field instructors. Early in my professional career as a social worker, I became a field instructor and have hosted many social work students who are eager to learn and to practice in the field. It is of the utmost

importance to me that those students end their time in the field practicum with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in the field when they graduate. Thus, I am highly invested in all social work students having successful field practicum outcomes.

In addition, I have worked in a management position for multiple years and have participated in the hiring process for many coworkers and social workers. Some new social workers who had just completed their field practicum experiences came to the interview table well-prepared to answer questions, engage, and share how their field practicum prepared them for the job for which I was interviewing them. However, others were ill-prepared, and the skills and tasks they identified from their field practicum did not prepare them adequately for a job as a practitioner. Needless to say, some differences between applicants could be their personalities and lack of interview skills, rather than their lack of job skills, but some seemed to be distinctly deficient in the latter area. That disservice occurred during their field experiences.

Lastly, through my studies as a doctoral student, I have become much more aware of critical perspectives (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2000) and have worked during my studies to better understand the power hierarchies and infrastructures that exist within our society, culture, and institutions that perpetually marginalize particular groups. Many semesters spent better understanding these concepts, including critical feminist theory, led to realizations of how dominant ideology, power, hegemony, and alienation have affected my experience as a social worker student, as a social worker within the profession, and as a woman.

I believe that all of these experiences increase my ability to understand and empathize with the experiences of recently-graduated social work professionals. I also recognized that it may be challenging to separate my own feelings, thoughts, and experiences from those of my participants, and that it will be of the utmost importance to ensure that participants' own feelings

and experiences are portrayed accurately. My hope is that my in-depth understanding of these experiences will add to the richness of the data presented and to the thoughtfulness of the findings' interpretations and implications for social work and adult education.

Additionally, approval was obtained from Penn State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting this study to ensure that no participants will be psychologically or emotionally harmed in the data collection process. The development of the interview tools, participant selection criteria, and plan for data collection and analysis followed their strict documentation process. The IRB also has specific guidelines that must be followed to maintain the confidentiality of participants and the ethics of conducting the study. As such, I conducted this research with the highest level of research integrity.

Participant Selection

Participant selection was an integral part of planning this study, because the participants' engagement and shared experiences determines the applicability of the information. Unlike quantitative studies that make use of large random samples, qualitative participant selection often utilizes purposeful criteria in order to obtain in-depth information about a particular topic from the perspectives of particular individuals. Creswell (2014) explains, "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants... that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 189). In light of the goals of the study, purposeful sampling was used to identify study participants who: 1) graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree from a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited institution; 2) immediately entered the workforce upon graduation and did not continue on to graduate school; and 3) have worked in the social work field post-graduation for at least one year, but not more than five years.

It was important for participants to have graduated from a CSWE-accredited institution, because not all schools of social work follow CSWE guidelines, which requires a field practicum component. The expectations of the students and field instructors may also be different at a non-accredited school. All CSWE schools have the same standards, and participants from accredited schools likely had similar requirements. It was also important that those undergraduate students immediately entered the workforce upon graduation and did not go to graduate school, because there is a field practicum component required in graduate school as well and could dilute or change their perceptions of their undergraduate practicum experience. Lastly, the third criterion was integral to the study, because it was important for the research participants to have had time to reflect on their field practicum experience and its impact on their experience of entering the workforce and to still be fresh in their minds and easily retrievable during the interview.

To find study participants I utilized a public social media posting, an undergraduate alumni listserv posting, and a posting to an undergraduate alumni social media page. I posted the purpose of my study and the participant criteria to the social media site Facebook and that post was shared on other users' sites. Respondents sent me a private message to inquire about participation. Two contacts at central Pennsylvania colleges with undergraduate social work programs were willing to post that same call for participants to a listserv and to an alumni social media page. Those interested in participating emailed me. Geography was not a factor prohibiting participants as long as they met the criteria. Interviews were conducted in-person if the participant lived within a one-hour radius of the researcher or were conducted over the phone if the participant lived further away.

Participants have been assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. Additionally, because there are few schools who are accredited by the CSWE the

universities the students attended will not be mentioned by name. All participants were female. The participants' race, year of graduation, type of university attended, and whether they were a traditional or nontraditional student are described in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Participant Information

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Traditional/Nontraditional</u> <u>Student</u>	<u>Graduation</u> <u>Year</u>	<u>Private/Public</u> <u>University</u>
Annie	W	Traditional	2015	Public
Eva	B	Nontraditional	2017	Public
Lynn	W	Traditional	2014	Private
Paige	W	Nontraditional	2017	Public
Hillary	W	Nontraditional	2017	Public
Lindsay	W	Traditional	2015	Public
Rebecca	W	Traditional	2017	Public
Megan	W	Traditional	2017	Private
Stephanie	W	Nontraditional	2017	Public
Marilyn	W	Traditional	2017	Private

As Table 1 above shows, this sample was not representative in regards to race or gender. Ideally, one or two male participants would have volunteered to better represent the gender demographics of social work students, but no male volunteers came forward. Similarly, the majority of participants identified as being white, while only one identified as being black. Additionally, a wider representation of schools of social work would have been ideal, but a public and private schools' perspectives are included from the participants. A mix of traditional

and nontraditional participants provided a wide range of perspectives in that regard.

Coincidentally, many of the participants graduated in 2017. It is possible that due to the more recent graduation date they were more connected with their school's social media to have access to the call for volunteers.

One participant was placed at was a county Head Start agency that serves families and children ages three through five who meet federal income requirements. Head Start agencies provide services in an attempt to best prepare children to start school in kindergarten and be on the appropriate grade-level skills and abilities. At this agency and others like it, some learning opportunities for social work students that could occur would be: intake processes of new children to the agency, home visits to meet with the families in their homes to provide support and reinforcement to them and to support other specialists, such as physical/occupational/speech therapists, who work with the identified child. They also connect the family with available community resources, such as employment assistance, support groups for parents and families, insurance assistance, and supplemental income, as needed.

Multiple participants completed their field experience practicums in agencies that serve children, adolescents, and adults, such as county children and youth agencies or case management agencies. These agencies assist children and/or adults with ensuring safety and maintaining autonomy in the community to the highest possible degree. They are multifaceted and can provide a wide variety of learning opportunities that may meet a student's interest. For example, county children and youth agencies often have an intake department, investigation department, long-term services department, and possibly more. These services can be voluntary, but are often involuntary and required due to safety concerns for children that have been reported to the state as possible victims of abuse or as someone who may harm themselves or others.

Students could observe and possibly participate in completing intakes, investigations of complaints regarding child safety, continued home visits to check on safety and well-being of the identified child or children, referrals made to outside agencies for medical care, mental health care, dental care, clothing and food needs, termination from services when they no longer required them, and more. Additionally, sometimes children and youth agencies are involved in court proceedings, removing children from the home, and re-introducing children to a home that may now be safe. Students could observe all of these processes, and possibly meet with children and/or families autonomously, if they had lower-level intensity cases and could be appropriately supervised.

Case management agencies often serve clients who need assistance with mental health, intellectual disabilities, community re-introduction post-prison release, and/or physical disabilities. These are vulnerable client populations and they can be children or adults. Similarly to the county children and youth agencies, they have the same types of departments as described above and provide similar types of services, but their services are voluntary and subsidized by the state or county government. Due to the size of these agencies and the multitude of departments, students could ideally see a wide array of services and client populations if they wish, with a variety of learning opportunities from which they would benefit as they prepare to enter the workforce upon graduation.

One participant worked in a private counseling center. Clients were all voluntarily seeking individual treatment for mental health. Counseling centers processes include intake and referrals, on-going treatment, and termination of services when the client no longer needs or wishes to have treatment. Another participant worked in housing assistance for a local YWCA chapter. Learning opportunities there could include interaction with local, state, and federal

policy related to housing by reading new policy and advocating for change, connecting clients with available housing, provide and manage rental assistance, and screening clients for transitional housing programs. One participant worked in a private foster care and adoption agency. Foster care and adoption agencies often have many departments, some devoted only to foster care and some devoted to adoption. These agencies often have to complete home visits to ensure safe environments, connect children in need with available homes, interview and approve foster care and adoption families, provide supportive resources to both the child and families, assist with reunification with biological parents, and assist with court proceedings related to terminating parental rights and ending in a final adoption. Ideally, students could see any or all facets of that agency's functioning.

Lastly, one participant worked with terminally-ill older adults in a hospice setting. Hospice agencies often provide in-home services and residential services, such as a hospice house. Learning opportunities could include supporting families and clients through terminal diagnosis by providing emotional support, preparation for hospice end-of-life services, support through decline, and after-death family services.

Data Collection Procedure and Methods

This section will describe the data collection methods and procedures used for this study as well the informed consent process. As noted previously, there are different tools that can be used to collect qualitative data, and each has their own strengths and purposes depending on the researcher's goals. "Qualitative findings are based on three kinds of data: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observations; and (3) written communications" (Patton, 2015, p. 14). Because I did not have access to direct observations of the field practicum experience, this study utilized two main sources for data collection: individual interviews and relevant

documents/artifacts, such as student handbooks, student/agency learning contracts, student evaluations by their field instructors, and any other documents that the participants felt were relevant.

Interviews

One-on-one interviews served as the primary source of information for this study. Interviews are common in qualitative data because, “interviews remain a cheap, convenient, uncomplicated, yet highly effective means by which to collect an extensive and usually rich amount of data” (Carey, 2012, p. 109). Since the events the participants discussed occurred in the past, I was not able to observe their field practicum. Rather, I relied on their memories and understanding of their experiences in their own words. Interviews were the key tool used for this study because they, “yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 14). Interviews are particularly valuable as they attempt to recreate experiences and include the actions that occurred and the feelings and thoughts of the interviewee during and after the experience (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004).

In looking for rich, detailed data, I used semi-structured interviews recorded by a digital voice recorder that will later be transcribed by hand. The semi-structured approach means that, “Most of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 110-111). This method of using open-ended questions to allow participants to speak about what is most important to them allowed me the ability to adapt, change, add, or delete questions based on what they are or are not sharing during the interview. The interviews

occurred at a place of the interviewees choosing at a neutral location like a local library, restaurant or a coffee shop.

I was interested in how recent graduates of BSW programs perceive that their internship experience prepared them for practice, but I was also interested in what their gendered experiences were like. I split the participant interviews into two separate interviews so that the introduction to the idea of gender playing a role the field practicum experience in the second interview did not influence the participants' answers to field practicum related questions in the first interview. The purpose of the first interview was to gain in-depth information regarding the format, activities, and tasks surrounding the field practicum only. The second interview moved the focus to the role of gender during that field practicum experience. There was an average of two weeks between the interviews. The preliminary interview guide can be found in the Appendix for reference, though additional follow-up questions were also asked.

Ten participants were interviewed after they met the participant selection criteria mentioned above. Each interview took approximately 25-50 minutes. Participants were from two schools of social work in Central Pennsylvania. Their graduation years ranged from 2014-2017. Four of the participants were of nontraditional college age (over the age of twenty-five) and the other six were of traditional college age when they completed their programs. Nine of the participants were Caucasian and one was black. All of the study participants were women.

Documents and Artifacts

Documents and artifacts serve as an ancillary form of data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that “documents and artifacts that are part of the research setting are also sources of data in qualitative research” (p. 162). Documents relevant to my study that participants provided or were made publically available online from the specific schools of social work include: the social

work student handbook, student/agency learning contracts, the syllabi for the field practicum semester, student self-evaluations, school of social work faculty lists, instructor evaluations of the student, CSWE guidelines for field practicum, and any other assignments or presentations the participants still had and were willing to share from that experience. These documents acted as a source for triangulating data (Creswell, 2014), in that they supported or contradicted findings that became known in the interviews. When the documents contradict any findings, it opens a window for follow-up questions with participants for clarification or further inquiry. When the documents support findings, they add a layer of reliability to the study, because multiple sources are confirming the same information.

Informed Consent

Darlington and Scott (2002) explain, “The capacity of an individual to give freely their informed consent to research is a core principle in research ethics” (p. 25). As mentioned previously, consent for this study was acquired from Penn State University’s IRB. The review board meticulously examined all aspects of the study, including the interview questions, purpose of the study, and participant criteria and protections to confirm that all measures were to ensure confidentiality and privacy, and that little to no risk of harm to the participants will occur during the research process. Each participant thoroughly read the consent form, which explains the purpose of the study, potential harm and benefits of participation, and efforts that were made to protect the information they provide. They had an opportunity to ask questions and were provided with my contact information for questions or concerns during and/or after their participation.

Data Analysis

Rocco and Hatcher (2011) explain that when researchers analyze data they draw valid meaning from the data by means of data reduction, in which the researcher reduces the data into more manageable segments from which patterns may emerge. These patterns often culminate in new findings that will either enhance current knowledge or challenge it in a new way. Typically, understanding findings from the data analysis takes place in light of the theoretical framework of the study, so it is important to understand the theoretical framework of the study as it relates to the research design.

Theoretical Framework as it Relates to Research Design

As noted in Chapters One and Two, three theoretical frameworks have informed all aspects of this study, including the research design and data analysis: experiential learning theory, communities of practice, and critical feminist theory. Experiential learning theory and communities of practice theory inform the necessity of the field practicum experience in clinical social work education, while critical feminist theory calls into question the institutionalized barriers that can exist unseen and unnoticed within society and specifically within the social work profession. The design of my study attempts to consider these perspectives and accentuate their importance by examining the field practicum experience itself and then exploring issues participants' faced related to gender in the social work workplace.

Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of hands-on learning opportunities that offer learners opportunities to learn from practice experiences (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). More specifically, during experiential learning opportunities, learners often engage with communities of practice that offer a space to listen to, engage with, and learn from currently practicing professionals in the field. Wenger (1998) explains, "we interact with each

other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn” (p. 45). The social work field practicum in itself is an experiential learning experience, but within that experience, students are engaging in communities of practice in the workplace (whether with their field instructor, other supervisors, other professionals, other students, etc.) and learning within that space.

The first part of my interviews focused directly on experiential learning and communities of practice and both theories informed my interview questions, listed above. It is important that students are learning the skills that they need to graduate and become successfully-practicing social work professionals. These questions aimed to explore what the participants’ experiences were, how they were helpful or not, and how engaging in a community of practice enhanced or inhibited their experience. Additionally, the documents and artifacts that were examined outline the emphasis on experiential learning and the goals, objectives, and expectations of students during their field practicum to engage in this type of learning.

The second part of the interviews utilized critical feminist theory as a framework to ask questions exploring participants’ perceptions of barriers or marginalization they personally faced or saw others within their field practicum agency facing, in an attempt to better understand how these issues are manifested within social work workplaces. Critical feminist theory expands the tenants of critical theory and feminist perspectives in an attempt to demonstrate to people, but specifically women, the importance of becoming educated and aware of perpetuated societal injustices related to their gender and to actively engaging in corrective action in an attempt to combat those ingrained issues. Despite its applicability to the social work field, it has hardly been used within the literature as a framework to understand social work practice in general, and not at all to better understand social work students’ experiences. Gringeri and Roche (2010)

emphasize, “Without critical feminist voices that highlight the ways in which inequalities in power and social structures distort gender, many people experience limited access to opportunities and a reduced potential for development” (p. 337). It is important then to give voice to participants who have experienced or observe gender-related marginalization during their social work field practicum in an attempt to correct these injustices for future students. Thus, data was coded in light of this study’s theoretical framework and research questions.

Data Coding

As Carey (2012) notes, “Analysis tends to be ongoing and takes place alongside data collection” (p. 218). Therefore, after each interview, the digital recording of the interview was transcribed for analysis and utilized to review and revise the interview questions for more effective future interviews. Darlington and Scott (2002) make an important note about transcribing interviews, “There will inevitably be a great deal of contextual material that does not get onto the tape, including non-verbals and aspects of the interview setting that may impact what is said and how” (p. 143). I took my own field notes during the interviews in an attempt to incorporate their non-verbal cues that cannot be included on a digital audio recording. In addition, any documents provided by the participant or presented publically by the schools of social work were uploaded into an electronic format. Both the interview transcripts and the documents were coded so that the information was more manageable. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199). There is not a prescribed coding procedure that all researchers use, so I developed my own codes and categories from the themes emerging from the data.

Themes

Once the data was coded and more manageable to work with, I organized it into themes using the constant comparative data analysis method. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this approach as, “comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarity and differences...The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data” (p. 32). These patterns are often known as themes and allowed me to find important similarities and differences between participants’ experiences. I organized large overarching themes and then broke them down into smaller categories that explain the meaning in detail. The themes and their subcategories are described in detail in Chapter Four.

Issues of Dependability and Verification

It is important for researchers to discuss the lengths to which they go in attempting to maintain credibility during the data collection and analysis process. Likewise, researchers attempt to maintain validity and confirm that the data is verified by the participants as accurate. These are sometimes referred to as integrity measures. “Integrity measures include the methods a researcher uses to verify plausibility or to diminish interference, contamination, or degradation of any part of the research process in order to strengthen the process” (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011, p. 171). This section will discuss the methods used to maintain high levels of credibility, dependability, and confirmability for my study.

Credibility

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that all research should be concerned with producing valid and reliable results, because “being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (p. 237). If a study is completed but the findings are invalid, it will not be useful to others in the field. Researchers should engage in measures to ensure that their findings are as accurate as possible so

that the study is credible. This study relied on two methods to maintain credibility: data triangulation and member checks.

Data triangulation. I used interview information, multiple instances of themes across the interviews, and document analysis as means of verifying the information that surfaced during my study. Using multiple sources of data for thematic confirmation is known as data triangulation. Data triangulation occurs when “themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201), ensures the researcher has not gone too far off course in their interpretation or understanding of information. If the findings from the individual interviews are confirmed in a document, it makes the findings stronger. If multiple interviewees address the same topics, the findings also carry more weight. Data triangulation confirms and strengthens findings and creates an additional layer of dependability and verification in qualitative research. Creswell (2014) explains, “if themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (p. 201). This crosschecking ensures a greater likelihood that the information obtained and the findings presented are valid.

Member checks. Member checks, also called respondent validation, were completed in an attempt to ensure that the meaning and understanding of the researcher matches the intended meaning of the interviewed participants. This is done by soliciting participant feedback on the preliminary themes and findings. “The process involved in member checks is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation ‘rings true’” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Maxwell (2013) asserts,

This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases. (pp. 126-127)

Participants were given the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or incorrect assumptions made by the researcher so that the intention of the participant is faithfully interpreted in the findings.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability deal with the issue of the trustworthiness of a study, which is important when readers are considering if the findings are applicable to other contexts. Qualitative research has always struggled to meet the rigorous expectations derived from the quantitative research field. Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) explain, “To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative research must demonstrate that data has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner” (p. 1). Unlike in quantitative research, in qualitative research, the goal is that the findings can be utilized to understand other situations, while not necessarily generalizing them to all situations. “The value of qualitative research lies in the particular description and themes developed within the context of a specific site. Particularity rather than generalizability is the hallmark of good qualitative research” (Creswell, 2014, pp. 203-204). Because this study takes place in a specific setting and will likely not be replicated, but may be used for expanding on the knowledge gained for future research, it is important that the study is credible and confirmable.

The quality of the data adds to its dependability. It is important that any researcher spend adequate time and effort in data collection to ensure that they get as much relevant information as possible. Researchers know they are done when the data feels saturated, “that is, you begin to

see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces as you collect more data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 247-248). Additionally, all alternative viewpoints should be presented from the data, not just viewpoints that the researcher wishes to be shared. The integrity of the researcher in collecting data until saturated and sharing all viewpoints that arise from the data is an integral part of dependability.

Additionally, peer examination is a strategy used to maintain study credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the doctoral process, the advisor and the dissertation committee members read and discuss the study rationale and proposed research methodology prior to the research beginning. This ensures that the methodology proposed is appropriate and adequate. The committee members’ expertise contributes to the creation of the study, and the advisor’s oversight in the process ensures that the procedures of data collection and analysis were followed. The committee also confirms credibility during the final dissertation defense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a basic interpretive qualitative research design was chosen as the best way to begin to explore recently-graduated undergraduate social work students’ experiences during their field placement. To gather data, interviews were conducted and documents were analyzed, coded, and organized into themes. Additionally, methods outlining the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study were presented. The findings from the analysis will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the research process and a discussion of the findings. As noted in previous chapters, the purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation?
2. What are the perceptions of recent social work graduates of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences?

The procedures used to explore these questions are detailed in Chapter Three but a brief summary is also provided here. Ten recent Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) graduates were each interviewed two times using a series of open-ended interview questions. The questions for the first interview addressed Research Question One and introduced Research Question Two; and the second interview questions were designed to specifically elicit information about Research Question Two. The interview guides can be found in the Appendix for reference. Additionally, documents, including course requirements, course descriptions, syllabi, student handbooks, the schools' websites, and student/agency learning contracts provided by the participants or by the schools from which they graduated were reviewed for any information relevant to the research questions. The interviews and documents were analyzed as described in Chapter Three. After

each interview, the digital recording was transcribed for analysis, along with any relevant documents provided by the participant. Both the interview transcripts and the documents were coded into themes to organize the main findings.

Analysis of the data revealed four major findings related to the research questions. The first round of interviews, addressing Research Question One, revealed three of the main findings related to their preparedness to enter the social work workplace. The first main finding is that preparation for the field practicum experience is an important component to students' ability to optimize their learning experiences. The second finding is that students need to learn through direct practice during the field practicum, including the procurement of specific learning experiences in order to be prepared for the workplace. The third main finding revealed the overwhelming importance and influence of coworkers for the student learning experience during their field practicum.

The second research question, regarding participants' perceptions of the effects of gender on their field practicum experiences, was explored using the interview questions for a second round of interviews. The fourth main finding emerged from these interviews: there is limited gender consciousness among these social work students, with little to no information coming from social work academia through discourse or course content related to current gender issues, nor from the social work field itself during the field practicum. Details for each of the four findings are presented below.

DATA DISPLAY

Preparation for the Field Practicum

Agency Selection Process

Time to choose

University-driven placements

Accommodating student needs

Agency Orientation Programs

Learning through Direct Practice

Recognizing Nontraditional Student Needs

Credit for life experience

Internship adjustments

Procuring Learning Experiences

Importance of having time in the field

Preferring to observe processes from beginning to end

Managing autonomous caseloads

Influential Roles of Coworkers

Supportive Coworker Learning Community

Guidance for learning

Wide range of clinical approaches

Supervisor Interactions and Support

Support for independence

Availability for guidance

High-level and non-social work supervisor disconnect

Limited Gender Consciousness

Programmatic Contributions to Critical Perspectives

Recognizing marginalization in society

Limitations of gender marginalization discourse

Social work faculty demographics

Unseen Gender Disparities during Field Placements

Preparation for the Field Practicum

During the participant interviews and while discussing which aspects of the field practicum impacted their readiness to enter the workforce, a topic that came up early and often in participant interviews was the overall process of selecting and beginning their field placement experiences. The agency at which the field practicum took place had a major influence on a student learning and the amount and quality of their experiences. Participants varied in the amount of input they had in the selection process for their field placement agency, with some expressing appreciation for being able to select their own, while others indicated the need for much more input into the process. Participants likewise experienced varying degrees of welcoming and orienting procedures to their field placement agencies.

Participants expressed feelings of confidence and concern about the amount of information provided to them regarding exactly how to select an appropriate internship in order to have the best learning opportunities and match their field practicum selection to their interests and future expectations and desires for where they will work. Some participants were connected effectively with agencies that matched their areas of interest, while others experienced mismatches, which occurred when the assigned agency did not offer the services about which the students were interested in learning. Fortunately, a few participants felt that they were able to participate in their selection placement and were satisfied with the selection. Alternately, other participants were not a part of the selection of their placement and they felt their interests were misaligned with the placement agency. For example, if students were interested in working with children, but then assigned a placement working with older adults, they were not engaging in learning tasks that would have optimized the practicum experience in order to prepare them for their future workplace with children.

To explore these issues further, the participants' field handbooks from both schools of social work were collected from participants during the interviews, as noted in Chapter Three. Evidence from the handbooks reveal little direction or specific instructions for students when it came to the selection of an agency for their field placements. For some participants, the school's field education coordinator stepped into this gap and provided direction and adequate planning time for them to research and reach out to agencies they felt would best meet their learning needs. For either school, there was neither a timeline nor instructions supplied to students for planning a certain amount of time to research and select an agency they felt would be appropriate. Some guidelines or suggestions for appropriate field placement agencies were contained in the handbooks. In University 1's handbook, the guidance includes only: "Placement settings need to...provide students the opportunity to practice through in-person contact from the base of the generalist perspective" (p. 14), which indicates the importance to the University of finding agencies that will provide ample interactions with coworkers and clients. However, the description is broad and could apply to any social service agency, regardless of its quality, which does not provide students with guidelines or suggestions for what types of agencies are available in the area and which agencies could align with specific student interests.

There also did not appear to be a provision for students to have the final say in choosing their placements: "Identification of the agency can be initiated by the agency, the student, Field Education Director or any combination thereof" (University 1 Handbook, p. 16). A few participants felt that they were pushed into specific agencies in the community, only because the university had a good relationship with that agency, not because it was the best fit for the students' learning needs. While some of the participants were affected negatively by the vague handbook descriptions, others had positive placement stories to share.

Some of the participants felt that they were able to spend time to do their own research of agencies, while others did not have enough time to do their own research in order to make an educated decision about the best placement for their individual needs. One participant who did have the opportunity to choose her placement shared how it greatly enhanced her learning. These issues are discussed in detail below.

Agency Selection Process

Participants shared their experiences with procuring field placements and how the opportunity to select the agency either made a difference in their learning experiences or could have made a difference.

Time to choose. The first major issue related to field placements and the need for additional direct learning experiences is that participants felt that that they needed more time for their agency search, so they could make an informed decision. Annie said,

I felt rushed when I was making my field placement decision. Like, we weren't looking and then all of sudden we were rushed. So, I wish I could have looked longer and really knew [*sic*] what options were available because I had no idea. So sometimes, I look at other agencies and I think I wish I would have done my internship elsewhere.

She went on to explain that she wished her university instructors would have encouraged her to start looking through the placement options early, for example, during the summer or the fall semester prior to the field placement semester, so that when the time came to start making decisions, she would have had a good idea of where she wanted to go. Instead, Annie chose the first field placement that was suggested to her, which was not directly related to her interests. When asked what she would have preferred she stated, "I probably would do more of social work in school, but I wasn't able to...so that was a huge downfall." She would have preferred to

have chosen an agency that was affiliated with an area of social work she was interested in working in after graduation.

Megan stated a similar concern with finding her placement agency:

I don't think they gave us a long time to choose. I wish in the beginning they would have been like, "We are doing this [choosing our agencies] on this date so you should think about it." At least telling us the guidelines to process it and research where we want to go. Instead of just saying, next week we are going to do this. I remember when I was researching I wish I would have known that I could have looked online. I just wasn't aware.

Lynn was the only participant who explicitly stated that she was able to take time to think about her interests and select a placement that she felt would best fit her learning needs. "The way that I approached my practicum was to either pick something that I wanted to rule out or something that I wanted to explore. It worked that way for me." Lynn chose an agency that she thought she might be interested in working for when she graduated. She felt that she benefited from her choice of a field practicum, because she was able to complete her 400 hours participating in and learning from the exact types of experiences in which she would be working upon graduation.

Fortunately, although other students did not feel as though they had as much of a say, they were still pleased with the agency that their school connected them with. Marilyn, Hillary, and Rebecca did not specifically choose their placements, but in the end they were happy with their experiences. Lynn suggested that students in BSW programs might feel that their practicum is more beneficial and that they might learn more if they have a role in what type of

experiences they are exposed to, so they can ensure it relates to their work interests for after-graduation employment.

University-driven placements. The second major issue related to agency placements that appeared to be driven more by the university than the students' needs. When asked outright if she had any say in her internship selection, Rebecca simply stated, "No." She seemed annoyed with the topic during the interview, particularly because she was placed in an agency in which she was not interested. Although she did learn some transferrable skills, she indicated that she would have preferred to have spent time in an agency for which she had an interest. Lindsay agreed with Rebecca's assertion and suggested that students needed to advocate for themselves in order to get a placement they desire or at least one in their area of interest. "I had a few friends who weren't as happy with their internships because it wasn't *[sic]* a field they wanted to go in but they just got placed there or settled for it." Lindsay stated that she advocated for herself when searching for her own field placement and was very satisfied with the agency she selected, at which she was able to take advantage of many opportunities.

Paige's perception of her placement had more to do with the university's larger goals rather than the goals of the students. Paige thought that she ended up at an agency only because it was closely-affiliated with the university and the university appeared to want to cultivate that relationship, and not because it would necessarily meet her learning needs. Paige also felt as though her university wanted to make a good name for itself by having students placed at high-profile agencies that were well known and respected in the local and regional communities. Even if students were not interested in those placements, she believed, the partnership or connection with university's name would be prominent in the community and they could then claim to have placed students in a variety of fields. She stated that,

The one thing that always bothered me was that they [the university] seemed to be bragging, “Oh we’ve worked with this company or this company and we can get you here,” and it seemed mechanical to a point. Like, it was almost businesslike and impersonal. What are you getting out of it if you’re just being processed through every semester?

Accommodating student needs. Another issue in the process of selecting the important field placement agencies related to locating one that could accommodate students’ personal and family needs. As Paige explained, she did not have much of a choice in her field practicum placement because of the needs she had for time to complete the required hours and her availability to complete them. As discussed in Chapter Two, social work students are required to complete 400 hours during the field practicum semester, although some schools of social work require more hours. This number of hours is typically completed during a 16 to 18-week period, which averages to approximately 25-30 hours per week. Paige struggled with choosing her field placement due to her special circumstances related to her availability to complete the field practicum hours. She felt like she was just another student being processed through the university, instead of the program attempting to determine her needs related to availability and interests: “It felt like it was more like a machine to me.” In Paige’s situation, that number of hours was difficult to complete, as she was working fulltime at her job at a community college. Her position at the college was not in social work, but, by completing her social work degree, she wanted the opportunity to move into that type of position in the future. She had hoped to find something that was related to working in a school or with higher education students. Paige also needed to find somewhere to complete her field practicum hours that was open outside of the traditional business hours that she worked at the community college.

As Paige struggled to find a placement, she said, “I did not have any practice experience available from [the] community college, but I had a good friend who was going through this with me who said that she knew somebody at [a hospice] center.” Her friend helped her find a placement at a hospice center already connected with their university, not because Paige was interested in working with terminally-ill older adults, but because it was open 24 hours per day and seven days per week, enabling her to complete her field practicum hours on weekends and after her normal working hours. As the agency was already affiliated with the university, they had agreements to accept students who needed placements, which made the process of selecting and initiating the placement easier for everyone involved. Paige was unique in the group of study participants, although perhaps not unusual in the social work student population as a whole, as she had no intention of leaving her job and remained there after she graduated, despite the fact that it was not in the field of social work. Paige felt she would have benefited more from a field placement that provided learning opportunities that would have enhanced her skills and knowledge in her job.

Fortunately, some participants were notified by their school field instructors to begin the search and were able to find an agency in which they were interested. Still others may not have had the time to find their own agency, but they were pleased with the agency that was selected for them. Unfortunately, other students were displeased with their placement options and felt they would have had better experiences elsewhere. According to the lack of information in the handbooks, then, there was no defined role for the student in the placement process at all and the universities were not required to provide a placement that matched the students’ desires. After a student has adequate time and information available to choose an appropriate field placement

that will optimize learning through experiences, participants suggest the next crucial step is receiving an adequate orientation to the agency's purpose, tasks, and internship expectations.

Agency Orientation Process

Orientation to the selected agency is important to allow a student to take an active role in affording themselves of all possible learning opportunities available to them at that particular agency. Participants described how important it was for them to receive a holistic orientation to their agency's mission and to their roles as student interns within the agency. One participant shared her experience with a thorough introduction and how that helped to prepare her to maximize her learning experiences. Megan described the process in which:

You have this checklist you have to take out and go to different agencies in the community so you can get to know them and learn about them. You have to go through an assessment course that you take over a period of time.

This checklist was an agency requirement, and no other participants mentioned such a rigorous orientation process. Megan's first few weeks were filled with time to get to know her agency and their partner agencies, as well as the community and the services that were available to their clients. They even had an assessment course that she had to take online, complete the training, and pass the final test, to ensure that she had the basic understanding necessary to begin successful integration into the agency. This time of integration and introduction allowed her to feel that she was prepared to take on tasks, knew what was expected of her while at placement, and knew what her role was at the agency.

Upon arriving at agencies, some participants explained that their agencies lacked a thorough and complete orientation and introduction to its mission, procedures, and overall expectations for their student interns. Although almost all of them did have some sort of

orientation or training time, it fell short of what was needed for an adequate preparation to begin their field placement tasks. According to one of the university's student field practicum handbooks, a task given to the agencies is to, "Provide an orientation to the agency and respective functions of its components...The field instructor [at the agency] should provide the following for the student: Agency information regarding purpose, function, policies, and procedures and the student's functions..." (University 1, p. 23). Despite this explicit directive, many participants shared the general confusion and misdirection that filled their first days, weeks, and, in one case, the entire practicum, which showed there was a disconnect between the expectation of the school and what the agencies are providing. One example came from Megan, who described her experience upon arrival at her placement agency this way:

They have basic training stuff at the beginning, but it goes in one ear and out the other because you don't really know. Even for me, having experienced it before, I still didn't really understand and you don't have a caseload so you just sit there.

Although there was an official agency orientation to tasks and expectations, Megan had no background regarding the agency's purpose, mission, or clients, so the information given to her did not make sense without knowledge of the context. This lack of knowledge made it difficult for her to understand the purpose of the tasks she was observing and to be aware of learning experiences in which she might be interested.

Rebecca did not have access to any official orientation at all, and stated, "I can't really say that they did the best job of really highlighting what my daily activities were going to be." Combined with the lack of information from her university and because she did not know what tasks she should be learning, she felt that time was wasted where she was not doing anything productive. Now that she works at the same agency, she has made suggestions for improving the

process of orienting interns to make sure that they do not have the same unproductive experience she had. “I think for interns coming, [we need to have] a more set training and set protocol for how we train interns.” This way interns will know what is expected of them and what learning experiences are available for them.

When Eva was asked if her agency had an introductory training, she simply responded, “No, I just had to provide clearances.” Eva said that she supposed that the “orientation” was the first few weeks she spent shadowing coworkers, but there was no formal introduction to information about the agency or what her purpose as a student intern there was. She was not given instructions on what tasks she was assigned to or what she should be learning, so she just followed her coworkers around and observed whatever was available. Eva thought that if she had had more direction from either the agency or the university, she could have purposefully chosen experiences to enhance her learning and to learn specific skills that she needed to have when she graduated.

Despite lacking an orientation and a training process for both interns and employees, upon graduation, Lynn still started working at the agency where she completed her field practicum. She, too, as both an intern and as an employee, struggled with the lack of direction and feeling as if she did not know what she was supposed to be doing. Like Rebecca, Lynn provided that feedback to her supervisor after she graduated, but, unfortunately, the preparation and orientation at her agency has not improved. She said, “We have had...people hired on and they quit within the first month because they were not prepared [for the job by the agency].” Not all students speak up, but in this case, when Lynn did, it did not have any impact on improving the experience for interns coming after her.

Based on their responses during the interviews, the majority of the other participants felt they would have benefited greatly from the same attention to detail in relation to orientation to and preparation for tasks at their agencies, as Megan experienced, so they could take advantage of all learning experiences that were available. Agencies are not lacking in available opportunities, as outlined in the beginning of the chapter. Instead, due to placements that are misaligned with student interests and learning needs as a result of a lack of preparation from universities to make the appropriate placement selections, and a lack of orientation to the agencies and their expectations for interns, participants felt that they were not able to take advantage of all of those experiences fully. Due to the learning opportunities that exist, agencies play a large role in providing appropriate learning opportunities.

Learning Through Direct Practice

In order for the agencies to prepare interns for their futures in the workplace, students need to learn through direct, hands-on, practice during their field practicum, including the procurement of specific learning experiences. The tasks they were assigned at the agencies were very important to participants, as they felt the need for the maximum possible amount of direct and hands-on experience with clients as possible. Additionally, participants expressed the need for both students and supervisors to procure learning experiences at their agency that would be relevant to the students' learning and their future goals. Of utmost importance was the need for opportunities to spend time in the field, observe clinical skills from beginning to end, and, ideally, have their own autonomous caseload during the latter parts of the practicum. Participants discussed both areas that worked well for them and areas that needed improvement.

While discussing the benefits of direct practice experience, an important and unexpected consideration became known: the unique needs of nontraditional students. Some nontraditional

students came into the program with previous experience that was related to social work. Additionally, some had difficulty managing the requirements of the field practicum experience due to their obligation to work a fulltime job during daytime hours. It would be remiss not to note that not all students have the exact same needs for direct practice, although, in some form or another, direct practice is necessary in the development of a social work clinician. The needs of nontraditional students related to direct practice will be discussed here, followed by participant experiences related to procuring appropriate learning experiences.

Recognizing the Nontraditional Student Experience

Four of the ten study participants were of nontraditional undergraduate student age (over the age of 25). Although many of them still had beneficial field practicum experiences, which will be discussed throughout this chapter, all four of them mentioned barriers and concerns that they encountered throughout the program and specifically during their field practicum experiences that seemed to be related to their differing life circumstances from those of the traditional-aged students (Graham & Donaldson, 1990). They felt that their experience lended itself to bringing diverse perspectives and enhanced their learning experiences because of the work background they had already acquired. The majority of concerns were related to recognizing and utilizing their previous life and career experience to offset some, if not all, of the field practicum hour requirement. One theme of their field practicum experience was that they felt their unique needs as nontraditional students were not addressed or considered in their programs' field practicum design. In some cases, students' completion of their program was in jeopardy due to conflicts between program requirements and other nontraditional student obligations.

Credit for life experience. As mentioned in Chapter Two, there is a trend of increasing numbers of nontraditional students attending undergraduate programs. These students felt that they had more to bring to the table because, as Eva described, “I think living out in the world makes you have a different perception.” Her experience navigating the social service system in her area as a single, working mom also provided her with valuable insight that many other students did not have. Similarly, Paige was working at a community college and wanted to continue working with students. She felt her experience with her own children provided her with additional insight when working with students:

At the time, my daughter was in the high school and I knew the challenges they were facing, the drama and whatnot, and I knew kids were struggling. I knew there were kids who had lost siblings and there were kids who didn’t have parents at home in the mental health things just kept getting bigger and bigger.

Despite these unique experiences, knowledge, and insights, the needs of the nontraditional student participants did not appear to be considered in the development of their program’s requirements. There was no mention of nontraditional student tracks, options, exceptions, or exemptions from the documents of either institution from which participants graduated. This was a major concern for Paige, whose father was ill and eventually died during her field practicum experience. She was completing her field practicum experience at an end-of-life care facility and felt that for many of the activities she was completing at her practicum, she was also completing in her personal life. Despite her personal experience and its similarity to her internship activities, Paige was required to complete the same number of hours in her field practicum as traditional undergraduate students. “Where does life experience play a part in social work? Social work IS life experience.”

In Eva's case, she had been working in a social service agency for many years prior to field practicum, but not as a social worker. When she started her field practicum experience, she was already familiar with many of the tasks, policies, and requirements of the agency. She wished that her relevant work experience could have been converted into field practicum credit hours, because, "Living out in the world makes you have a different perception. I had working experience, compared to an 18-year-old who just started, and they aren't used to paying the bills." Her perception was that part of the reason for the field practicum experience was to orient younger and inexperienced students who were not used to the professional workforce, and as someone who had been working for many years, she felt that she did not need the same orientation.

Since she was someone who was planning to stay in the same line of work, and either needed or wanted to finish a bachelor's degree, she felt the requirements were too stringent for her unique situation. She said, "I loved the coursework, but the practicum I dreaded every day that I had to go." Hillary suggested, "If you're a recovering drug and alcohol addict you definitely have some life experience. Can you modify it and give credit for it because it should certainly be looked at." It is important to note that no participants suggested that students should receive a workload reduction just because they are nontraditional students, just considerations regarding to the layout or hour requirement for their field practicum experience specifically.

Internship adjustments. Building on the ideas related to life experience, the nontraditional participants had many different experiences related to the internship requirements and their scheduling of hours. As mentioned previously, CSWE-accredited schools are required to have students complete a field practicum with a minimum of 400 practice hours prior to graduation (CSWE, 2016). CSWE explains that "Field education is the signature pedagogy for

social work” (CSWE, 2015, p.12); making it imperative for students to spend time in the field to adequately prepare themselves to be competent social workers when they graduate. Hillary indicated that she felt that because the strict practicum requirements could not be modified to include experience hours were too stringent. She suggested adaptable hours could be applied to those students who had *relevant* work or life experience that informs their work in the field.

Stephanie discussed how she understands the necessity of a field practicum for students who have never had experience in the field:

I think in some cases there absolutely needs to be a practicum, but in some cases, like mine, absolutely not. It should be a case-by-case basis or if a student is uncertain about a field it’s good to put you there to see if that’s what you really want to do.

It is important to note that, despite this perceived barrier in their field practicum, all nontraditional students did take the opportunity to share positive experiences regarding their field practicum, which are shared in each section of this chapter. For example, despite the fact that she did not feel a practicum was necessary for herself, Stephanie still felt that the practicum was helpful for students (nontraditional or traditional) who wanted to try a new field or a subsection of the social work field they had not seen before.

Meeting the minimum number of required hours was a challenge for every nontraditional student participant because of a lack of flexible hours and the difficulty of managing family and work demands along with the internship hours. For example, as a single mom with multiple children, it was extremely difficult for Eva to juggle attending class, completing her internship hours, working full time, and caring for her children. “I was a nontraditional student, so I needed something that was during school hours because I have children who are in school. So I needed something that would fit my schedule.” Hillary made similar comments, noting that, “I have a

life outside of this and one of our biggest complaints was that they [the schools of social work] don't understand that we are working all day and coming in the evening."

Paige described her experience in light of the family issues she was enduring while trying to complete her degree:

My father started having hallucinations that started in October and he died in January. So during that time I became his power of attorney, I had to get his house ready for sale, and I was trying to do my schoolwork. Then they hit me with, you have to do this 500-hour internship. It was awful. I considered dropping out of the program.

She said she tried to work with her school advisor and field placement supervisor, but, "They said you have to do these hours and that we don't have any flexibility." Working with Paige through these issues, the field placement supervisor was as lenient as possible to include outside experiences for her to meet her hour requirement to graduate, and ultimately she did successfully complete her program and graduate, but overall it was a major hindrance to her learning to have to be continually advocating for her hours and trying to make it work.

In summary, nontraditional students felt they were met with barriers in trying to complete their field practicum experience and likely impeded their learning. First, students who had prior work experience or relevant life experience felt that it could be translated into a decrease in required practicum hours or something comparable. Additionally, due to the external needs of nontraditional students in areas such as employment and family obligations, many felt that the high number of required hours for the field practicum made it very difficult to complete the program, especially when many of the social service agencies available for internships only had daytime hours.

It is important to note that some nontraditional students still felt prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation because they had prior direct practice experience. For example, Eva was already working in the social services field prior to getting her social work degree and she shared, “Although I feel like the internship prepared me for what to expect, I don’t think it prepared me for the actual job itself.” Fortunately, she was still able to successfully enter the field, but her preparation was not specifically related to the field practicum experience. For traditionally-aged students and nontraditional students who have not had relatable social work experience, it could be much more pertinent to complete a longer field practicum experience, as is currently expected.

Procuring Learning Experiences

Arguably, the most important part of the field practicum is the opportunity to complete learning tasks and engage in useful, hands-on experiences, since that is where skills, knowledge, and competencies are learned. This is addressed in both schools’ student field practicum handbooks. There are some overarching expectations for agencies to provide experiences that will benefit them in their preparation for the workplace. From University 1, the handbook indicates that agencies should “Provide students with opportunities in practice as early as possible” (p. 22). University 2 states that “The agency needs to provide students the opportunity to practice...It is important that the agency be able to provide appropriate learning experiences for students, including work assignments” (p. 79).

Additionally, University 1 expects agencies to provide:

Placement settings...selected to provide students the opportunity to practice through in-person contact...[and] Practice opportunities need to be provided to the student, by the

agency, that are consistent with identified learning needs of the student, particularly as they relate to program competencies. (pp. 14-15)

It is clear that the universities in this study expect that field practicum placements will provide the students with learning opportunities and that those experiences should involve client contact.

The handbooks go on to describe learning opportunities with more specificity for the agencies, as in the case of University 1, whose handbook states, “Structure a workload of reasonable volume and complexity with focus on the individual learning needs of the student. Provide a variety of assignments that permit depth and breadth” (p. 22). At the same time, universities in this study appear to expect some degree of personalization by agency and student, depending on the student’s interest and identified areas of need for growth. University 2’s handbook includes the statement that, “The responsibilities and tasks assigned to the student need to be consistent with the identified learning needs of the student” (p. 80). Later in the same handbook, students find this statement: “The field instructor is expected to develop and structure a workload for the student that meets department requirements and which increases in complexity as the learning needs of the students develop and change” (p. 83). It is extremely clear that tasks assigned to students need to be purposeful and structured to meet social work competencies and the specific students’ learning needs.

Lindsay felt lucky because her agency had had interns before, who were then hired on at the agency, so they understood what she needed to be prepared for the workplace. She said, “The other coworkers, they understood the position I was in as far as not always having something to do. So they would set aside work for me.” Similarly, Lynn shared, “I wasn’t their first intern, so that helped a lot.” Thus, some agencies who had had interns previously seemed to

be better prepared to have appropriate tasks to do; but, on the other hand, there were agencies who had interns year after year who did not make any improvements in tasks to support their learning experiences.

Alternatively, despite these explicit instructions for the placement agencies, other participants described practicum experiences with inappropriate tasks for learning or without clarified tasks that ensured that learning actually took place. Hillary shared,

There were days that I would just hang out on the computer because they had nothing for me to do or no one wanted to take me out and have me shadow or I would just do paperwork which wasn't very beneficial.

She said these issues impacted her having time for mentoring with her supervisor. Due to lack of exposure to learning experiences at the field practicum agency, she did not often meet with her supervisor, because she did not have any learning experiences to discuss:

I didn't get a lot of supervision for a while because I wasn't really doing anything, I was just faxing letters and doing clerical work, so I didn't have any experiences to sit down and talk about what I was learning.

Hillary believed that she missed many potential learning experiences in the field because she was assigned inappropriate tasks like those described in the previous quote. Beyond that, she then did not get to engage in helpful supervisory feedback because she was not engaging in any work that needed to be supervised. For example, ideally, Hillary could have shared some learning experiences with her supervisor and then her supervisor could give her feedback on client interactions, alternative approaches, best practices for particular situations, and other examples that would have been applicable to that skill.

Paige had similar thoughts about her assigned field placement agency and described her own experience:

You end up doing a lot of grunt work. I know that a lot of other girls... said they ended up doing the filing although the advisors were saying this isn't what you're supposed to be doing. I remember at one point there was the week that we all sat down together and it felt like there was nothing positive. We asked them, "What did you do this week?" And they said, "The same thing I did last week." [Some students] were really just bored and doing their homework because they didn't really teach you anything.

Paige was also assigned inappropriate tasks and was not able to take advantage of potential learning experiences because she was not engaging in hands-on activities or direct practice experience.

Eva, on the other hand, felt taken advantage of in her agency because she is bilingual. She was called on to help out with Spanish language documents, which did not provide the learning experiences she expected: "There were days where they knew I was Spanish speaking and if I had nothing to do they would just have me translate documents, which I don't enjoy doing." Her agency was using her to provide a service to them for free that was not actually related to her learning at all and the time she spent translating documents was time that was missed in engaging in learning experiences that may have prepared her for her future work as a social worker.

Rebecca felt that she had a more problematic experience. She described that she and her fellow social work students perceived their time during their field placement as "...feeling like they were just a pain." In this agency, interns had no direction and no task assignments, so they were just sitting in the office waiting for something to do. In addition to the normal routine of

doing nothing, Rebecca stated that when the interns in her placement agency asked for opportunities to learn, they felt like they were bothering their coworkers and supervisors by asking for something to do.

Megan also shared a disappointing experience with her placement. When attempting to obtain learning opportunities, agency workers were not helpful in providing opportunities to assist in the learning process of the interns. Megan suspected that the reason there was so much time spent doing nothing at her agency was because the field supervisors did not make it clear to the lower-level agency workers how they could be helpful. She suggested,

Supervisors should let caseworkers know that you want them to take out new workers and you're encouraging them to take out new workers or pair them up with someone specific to go out with. Because otherwise they might just sit there and no one ever comes by, or people don't know if they can take them out.

She believed that if it was clear to their coworkers that they should include interns during appropriate learning experiences, they might have provided Megan with more opportunities to observe or engage with coworkers and agency clients.

Beyond just generally being assigned inappropriate tasks that did not facilitate student learning, participants shared specific learning experiences that they felt would have enhanced their preparedness to enter the workforce upon graduation. Ensuring they had time in the field, including exposure to clients and work tasks, the opportunity to follow processes from beginning to end, and the possibility of maintaining their own autonomous caseload were the most common recommendations. Additionally, participants who were able to capitalize on those types of experiences shared how beneficial they were to their learning.

Importance of having time in the field. Participants specifically noted the importance of having time in the office or in the community to meet with clients or to observe other clinicians meeting with clients. When asked what was one of the best parts of her field placement, Marilyn mentioned, “What went really well was the amount of interaction I got with clients and being in the field.” Annie had a similar experience. “It was a great placement because after a few shadowing experiences I was able to do a lot of stuff on my own.” It was extremely beneficial in preparing her to work after graduation when she was able to complete those tasks proficiently on her own prior to graduating. Lynn noted that it was helpful to get a realistic idea of the job expectations during the field practicum:

I was able to see what the caseworker actually did on a day to day basis because I hear a lot of people that come into the job blind [without having prior knowledge of expectations] don’t know how much traveling is involved and how much you have to go to people’s homes.

The experience allowed her to better understand what a post-graduation position in that field entails on a daily basis and what types of tasks and skills it required if she was going to work in that field after she graduated.

Paige confirmed these thoughts and explained, “Trainings and resources can really only get you so far until you’re able to really be in the field and do it yourself.” This is essentially the affirmation of the necessity of experiential learning to prepare students to work as practitioners after they graduate. Unfortunately, Paige did not have that opportunity. She felt that she attended training and researched resources offered by the agency but was not able to go into the field and use the skills she had learned during her practicum. If she could not use the skills, they were not solidified for her and she was less prepared to use them immediately upon graduation.

Even for participants who were not able to have their own client caseloads or individual client experiences, shadowing real-life cases and situations were mentioned as being the most helpful. Lindsay explained, “For the most part I shadowed... it did prepare me for when I started meeting one-on-one when I get hired.” She was able to see the approaches, interventions, and even the verbiage that clinicians used, which helped prepare her to do the same things when she was working after she graduated. Megan noted, “I had to take more initiative than I thought I would have to. [I wish] I could have seen other assessments and gone out more.” She wished that she would have been offered more opportunities or advocated for herself to have more learning experiences, and that by doing that she would have been better prepared for her work after she graduated. When asked, “What do you think was the most influential person or experience during [your internship]?” Rebecca responded, “I think just being able to be hands-on and in the field.” Rebecca felt that the most important facet to her being prepared to be a competent social worker was the time she spent in the field. The next section addresses another important part of the time spent in the field, which was the opportunity to observe complete processes and social work tasks from beginning to end so they could be fully understood.

Preferring to observe processes from beginning to end. One theme mentioned by many participants was that they were not able to see complete processes from beginning to end and then how those processes affected clients. Fortunately, Annie said that she had a great experience with this because she mainly stayed with one or two people. She shared the process at her agency when she was able to watch a coworker with a client, develop a plan for a second client with her coworker, and then take both of those clients on as her own. She “...shadowed with her the first one, the second one she had me do the plan, and then I would just take them on

as my own clients.” She was first introduced to the process, and then she actively participated in the process to learn the steps before she was able to complete the full process on her own.

Unfortunately, most other participants’ experience seemed to be in bits and pieces. For example, Megan said,

I shadowed one person and we would be able to help someone or do such-and-such, but I wouldn’t be able to be there to follow up, so I wish I would have followed a certain 4 people that worked there or something to see all the steps.

She was only able to see pieces of the whole process, which made it hard to connect all of the steps together as a strategic process to approach client issues. She knew that she would need to know how to do that after she graduated and started working. Many participants had similar experiences as Megan, where they would shadow different agency workers and see random parts of different assigned tasks, such as intakes, counseling appointments, or terminations. They felt it was difficult to completely understand the process the whole way through because they only saw bits and pieces of the tasks involved.

One specific barrier that Hillary encountered that she felt hindered her ability to engage with clients independently was related to accessing records because of client privacy regulations. “Due to their HIPPA process I was never actually able to do the goal plans or the case notes or anything like that.” Hillary missed those steps in the process because she was not able to interact with any of the case records. She felt that if her agency could not allow her to access client information or do anything independently, it was possibly not an appropriate agency for interns as so many of the skills and learning experiences were off-limits.

It is imperative that students have the opportunity to thoroughly understand complete processes and to spend time in the field observing clinicians working with clients, since they will

be expected to have those skills when they enter the workforce. If they only see parts of the whole and do not understand the entirety of a process, they will not be able to determine the success or failure of particular approaches, nor will they be able to replicate those successful complete processes in the workplace upon graduation. Participants wanted the potential for more client interaction, have the opportunity to have more autonomy as interns, and have time to see complete processes in the agency. It is important that the agency, the school, and the student both take responsibility in procuring appropriate learning experiences by honoring the requirements in the field practicum handbook, ensuring agencies provide learning opportunities and students taking advantage of those opportunities. Due to the necessity of the agency to provide experiences and adequate supervision, the agency can have great influence in the learning experiences for students.

Managing an autonomous caseload. Another important theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of the student caseload in learning through direct practice. Multiple participants mentioned that either having their own caseload or having the opportunity to have independent interactions either helped or would have helped with their confidence and competence in preparing to work in the field on their own. One university's handbook describes their first program goal: "To prepare students to become competent entry-level social work practitioners" (University 1, p.6). To explore the success of this program goal, participants were asked about what they expected their experience would be like and what their actual experiences were with having their own client caseloads. Lindsay shared that at her agency,

It was a great placement because after a few shadowing experiences, I was able to do a lot of stuff on my own. I shadowed for 3-4 different sessions and then after that they

would just send me and I would do them on my own and I would do the paperwork and the follow up calls.

Lindsay felt that her learning experiences were appropriate and facilitated her preparation to use those skills when she graduated. Megan and Stephanie had a similar experience. Megan said, “I was able to shadow people and when I had my own cases I knew what I was doing and had a good grasp.” Stephanie shared,

I pretty much had my hand in everything. All we really did was intake, assessment, and running groups and I pretty much did all of it... Honestly how I learned best is just to do it and learning as I go, which was nice.

They felt that these direct practice experiences were integral to preparing to work competently after graduation and some of the most important learning experiences.

Alternatively, Lynn, Hillary, Eva, and Marilyn all felt that they had missed an important learning opportunity. Lynn discovered during the field practicum semester that,

One of my best friends did her placement with [agency] and she was able to have her own caseload. So she would come into class and share these awesome experiences about taking a child to court and I remember feeling jealous like, “Why am I not having these same experiences?”...They actually gave her cases and made her go out on her own. She always said she felt like her experience was better than mine because she was doing the casework part of it.

Hillary, likewise, faced barriers in accessing client records and information. She was also unable to meet with clients on her own due to her specific agency’s policies. She said,

I wish I could have been considered somehow an actual employee so I could get a better understanding. Even if it was a caseload of like three and the family would know I was just an intern and I could be leaving.

This opportunity would have allowed her to access appropriate information and attempt to integrate practical social work skills on her own. Stephanie reinforced that thought, specifically confirming the theme of direct practices and learning, with the suggestion that,

If they're not letting you do things independently, try to do things independently because that's really how you learn. After a while sitting and watching is great, but you really don't know how you're going to do in a situation where you have to take lead.

When discussing preparation for entering the workforce upon graduation, Eva indicated that she also did not have her own cases, which resulted in a feeling of incompetency when she started working after graduation. She stated,

No, I wasn't ready. I didn't have my own caseload and up to that point I was just shadowing and I never got to do anything myself. I think if I would have had my own caseload during my internship, I would probably be answering [the interview questions] differently.

Marilyn's experience and response was almost identical to Eva's.

If I could re-do it, I would have chosen an agency where I was able to have my own caseload and I was able to interact with clients by myself...that's why I think it was harder for me when I stepped into the working world.

Without the opportunity to practice these skills independently and directly with clients, participants felt ill-prepared to enter the workforce after graduation.

Direct practice experiences and exposure to clients for optimal learning and preparation for the workplace is the purpose of requiring a field practicum in the field of social work. Those who had useful, impactful learning opportunities shared that managing their own caseload and having significant time in the field to observe was very helpful to them. Others shared that they wish they could have had those types of experiences, as well as observing full processes from beginning to end. If students are expected to begin working in a social services agency when they graduate, they need to be exposed to all aspects of the job and to as wide a range of client issues as possible while they are placed in the different agencies. Beyond the significant need for procuring these learning opportunities expressed by the participants, they also testified to the essential role of their coworkers in their learning experiences during the field practicum.

Influential Role of Coworkers

During the interviews, almost all participants specifically discussed the important role coworkers played in their learning experiences during their field placement semester. Students observed and then were able to engage with their coworkers within the communities of practice that existed within the agencies, and in many instances, coworkers were the ones who filled in the gaps left from the previously described inadequate orientations to the agencies, confusion on tasks or roles at the agencies, and the lack of direct practice for the best possible learning experiences. All participants agreed that they were able to observe and learn from their coworkers, who provided additional guidance and diverse approaches to work-related tasks and skills. Additionally, participants discussed the role of their supervisors in their learning, particularly noting the importance of frequent interactions with the interns and their need for their support. Thus, the role of their coworkers in the participants' learning provided knowledge or skills for their transition to the workforce upon graduation.

Supportive Coworker Learning Community

One of the subthemes that emerged regarding the significant role of their coworkers in participants' learning experiences was how their coworkers facilitated learning through interaction and support for the participants. Partly due to their more frequent availability, many participants mentioned the additional guidance that coworkers provided was a great benefit to their learning and that without their coworkers, their learning opportunities would have been greatly reduced.

I think the influence of my coworkers was more influential than my supervisor. They're in the field and they're doing stuff and I can learn from them, and my supervisor has a completely different job. I definitely learned more from my coworkers than I did from my supervisor.

As described by Paige, this was the sentiment repeated by many of the participants. As will be discussed later in this chapter, many of the supervisors, in their administrative roles, were physically removed from the normal orbit of the social workers who were working directly with clients. Thus, in some cases, the supervisors were not always familiar with day-to-day tasks, leaving it to the intern's coworkers to fill in information and skill and knowledge gaps related to these entry-level social work positions.

Lynn said, "My supervisor was amazing, but they can only teach you so much because they have a lot on their plate, too." In some cases, supervisors were helpful but unavailable, so participants relied on their coworkers to engage in opportunities to learn. Marilyn shared that her supervisor was helpful to her learning, but her coworkers were the ones who made her feel included in the work and engaged in her learning. She said,

As for other coworkers there, I referred to them for asking questions and I shadowed with them. So, I felt like I was being trained by everybody there. I really thought it was a good group of people. And it was nice because we all had a good relationship and it helped introduce the idea of me getting hired on [after graduation] because everyone was in support because I had already worked with them a lot. I didn't feel like "the intern". They made me feel like I was contributing to an important part of the work.

Beyond generally being helpful in her learning, Marilyn specifically identifies the influence her coworkers had in her successful onboarding to work at the agency after graduation. Her coworkers brought her into the fold of the clinicians in the agency so she could participate in the experiences.

Many participants were extremely grateful for the roles that coworkers played in their learning. Anna said of her placement experience, "It's all taught by coworkers. So everything you learn is pretty much from coworkers. Everyone was willing to help me understand things better." Eva also shared the same feelings:

I mostly worked with the other case managers. My supervisor said, whatever the case managers need help with, you will go to them first for getting a new task to do. I often felt that even though I wasn't getting as much supervision as I would have liked, I still felt like I was learning and I was supervised by the fellow case managers.

Despite the lack of direction from her supervisor, Eva felt that her coworkers salvaged her learning experiences.

Hillary and Stephanie describe this assistance from coworkers as being very helpful to them. Hillary said, "Everybody always chipped in if I had any questions;" and Stephanie shared, "I had coworkers who I hung out with a lot and who helped a lot." In most cases, coworkers

were open and inviting to the interns, and played an important role in helping the participants in procuring learning opportunities. Megan felt more comfortable discussing her experiences and questions with coworkers than with her supervisor. “It was helpful to process a lot of stuff that we were doing... and it was easier to talk about it with them than with a supervisor because she [the supervisor] was out of the picture.” Since she did not have a close relationship with her supervisor, she utilized her coworkers to process and reflect on her learning experiences.

On the other hand, a few participants voiced concern that it should not have been up to the coworkers to fill in the gaps of the experience. At Eva’s field placement, she felt that the coworkers were somewhat pessimistic about the agency itself. The fact that she had to rely on those coworkers for most of her experiences made it uncomfortable. “I love the case managers dearly, but sometimes they just spoke very negatively of [the agency], so at times I felt that the environment was negative.” Although the coworkers still played a major role in offering learning opportunities to her, it was not what she would have preferred. Ultimately, due to the tremendous influence that coworker have on students, that experience caused Eva not to apply to work at that agency after graduation.

Wide Range of Clinical Approaches

Besides providing additional guidance, explanation, and support, observing and interacting with coworkers provided participants with an opportunity to see a variety of work styles and approaches or strategies for working with clients. When asked what the best learning experience at her internship was, Marilyn discussed the opportunities she had to watch another professional work with clients in the field. She valued:

Attending level meetings [i.e. department meetings] and going on home visits and seeing how case managers would interact with kids. What kinds of things they addressed, what

kinds of things they wouldn't address, and being professional. Watching another coworker be professional with a family was very helpful.

Especially for students who go into the internship experience with little or no prior work experience in the social work field, this is possibly their first and only opportunity to learn how to be a social work professional. This time of acclimation and observation is what helps them to socialize themselves to what it means to be a social worker in general, but also a social worker in that specific type of agency and specifically in that workplace.

Lynn said, "I pretty much had my hand in everything. I liked moving around with all the different counselors because each counselor had their own style of running groups and doing assessments which was good to see." Ideally, students can see multiple work styles, which will allow them to see client responses to and effectiveness of the different styles, ultimately informing their own approaches in their future workplace. A wide variety of contexts in which social workers function also introduces them to a diverse clientele with diverse issues.

Additionally, Eva felt that she was also contributing by giving input into situations that were occurring at the agency. She said, "They made me feel like I was contributing in an important part of the work." This medley of opportunities to learn, to contribute, and to receive feedback provides the best possible environment in which to learn about the social work field as a whole and the many services that can be provided.

The role of the coworkers at the field placement agencies made great impacts, mostly positively but occasionally negatively, on the participants. It allowed for students and coworkers to engage in learning from each other by discussing different experiences and approaches. At Megan's agency, they had a requirement that interns had to have experiences shadowing multiple caseworkers so they could see multiple perspectives. "They liked us going out with different

people. So, I went out with the three people who were there the longest and it was good to do that because everyone does things so differently.” She was able to share experiences she had with other coworkers and receive feedback from different perspectives by learning with so many different people. Overall, the role of the coworker possibly contributed the most significantly to every participant’s learning in this study. In contrast to the daily interactions with coworkers, participants had much less interaction with their supervisors. In some cases, this meant that the supervisor’s role and experiences did not contribute as much to the participants’ learning as they would have hoped.

Supervisor Interactions and Support

While the theme of supportive coworkers who enhanced and facilitated participants’ learning was stark, an additional theme emerged with regard to learning experiences because of their interactions with their supervisors. For the sake of clarity, in this dissertation and as noted in previous chapters, the terms *supervisor* and *field instructor* are used synonymously. Both schools had student field placement handbooks that outlined the responsibilities of the student, the school, the agency, and the field instructor in the field placement experience. Both handbooks identified supervisory requirements and tasked the university with finding agencies who would be appropriate for the student’s learning needs and provide adequate learning opportunities.

One university’s handbook clearly stated, “The BSW Field Education Director has direct responsibility for finding and approving agencies for potential field agencies and for screening and approving identified field instructors at the agency” (University 1, p. 13). Similarly, the other university’s handbook states, “The field coordinator screens, reviews, and approves agencies for field placements and screens, reviews and approves field instructors to supervise students

according to the policies and procedures established by the department.” (University 2, p. 77). These supervisory expectations are clearly outlined in the university handbooks due to the perceived benefit of the supervisor/student interaction. Some participants had very influential learning experiences with their supervisors that will be discussed below.

Support for independence. Megan felt that her supervisor and supervisory experience was supportive of her learning. “I took initiative a lot of times in having her sit down with me to talk about things, especially since she was the director.” In part because her supervisor was the director of the agency and she did not have time to work with an intern on the daily details involved in an intern’s position, Megan was given the opportunity to do work independently, “I didn’t feel like she was micromanaging me, she gave me a task and then let me go.” This added to her feelings of independence and preparation upon graduation. This required advocacy on her part to meet with her supervisor if she had questions and this approach may not be successful for other students in her position.

Annie enjoyed meeting with her supervisor and used that time to discuss her learning experiences, “She provided supervision but then...I was able to do a lot of work on my own, but then I would come back and consult with [her].” She felt it was a good balance of having the ability to work on her own, but ask questions and discuss experiences with her supervisor weekly. Stephanie discussed her supervision time stating, “Yes...my supervisor was very, very wise and she always had very insightful things to say. I would say our supervision was very helpful.” Additionally, she participant was able to sit in on case consultations where multiple clinicians were able to ask their supervisor questions about their cases. She described these consultations as learning experiences for her:

Once a month we have meetings for our higher client kids (they're at a higher level of care and often have more behaviors) and I could participate in those meetings. And I remember the first time I sat in I was just blown away. I was like, "I have no idea what they are talking about and what all these terms are, this is so confusing and I will never be able to get to this level of critical thinking." But, by the end of the semester I felt like I had grown successfully and I was able to understand these meetings and there were times when I was like, oh I feel like my critical thinking grew a lot, or it developed a lot more during the course of the semester.

Participants who experienced supervision according to the recommendations outlined by CSWE (2016) reported a positive contribution to their learning, though many of the other participants did not have that experience with supervision.

As described above, many interns had positive interactions with supervisors that enhanced their field practicum experiences. However, despite expectations about the roles of the agency and supervisor in both of the handbooks from the schools of social work, explicit requirements and the approval process completed by the university appear to be problematic with regard to the quality of guidance provided by both the agencies and the supervisors. The lack of availability to meet with their supervisor, the supervisor's lack of knowledge of the introductory-level job functions and tasks, and the social work degree held, if any, were common concerns and will be discussed below in more detail. While these expectations of the level of support of the supervisor was made clear by both universities, unfortunately the reality of supervision did not always match the expectations set forth.

Availability for guidance. As explicitly outlined in both university field practicum handbooks, there is a concrete expectation for a supervisor to be available to meet with students

regularly and as needed. One university's expectation was, "The field instructor must have time available...to focus with the student on the learning objectives for field. A minimum of one hour per week for the student-instructor conference is required" (University 1, p. 16). Additionally, "Structure a regular supervisory-learning conference time weekly, minimum of one hour (University 1, p. 22)." Similarly, the other university's handbook referenced, "The agency needs to demonstrate the availability of a qualified field instructor with adequate time to carry out the responsibilities needed to provide the student with a quality field experience" (University 2, p. 79). Additionally, "It is expected that the field instructor provides a minimum of one hour of weekly supervision for the student" (University 2, p. 83). This weekly supervision time is important as it allows students to have a mentor relationship with an experienced member of the social work field, debrief and reflect on learning experiences, request different experiences that meet their needs or interests, ask questions, and share concerns.

As mentioned above, Annie felt privileged to work with her supervisor, because she had excellent experience and wisdom that she could share; but, "My supervisor was the deputy director, so I really only saw her once a week during our scheduled time." She wished she could have had more opportunity to work alongside her to see how her experience and competency were put into practice. She heard stories of her fellow classmates who were not allotted even that bare minimum requirement, "Other students shared negative experiences that they had with their [field] instructors not doing supervision as regularly as they should have been." In Annie's positive experience with her supervisor, it would have been unfortunate if she had not had even that much time.

Eva had a similar experience to the classmates Annie described. "I would say I was only getting supervision once every two weeks. I wish it was more, but she was always all over the

place because she was so busy.” She appreciated her supervisor’s input when she was able to get it, but, due to her supervisor’s administrative responsibilities, she could not provide even the most basic level of supervision required for an intern. Marilyn, validating Eva’s experience but then moving beyond it, felt that she had a particularly difficult supervisory experience, because, “I had three different supervisors during my internship.” Due to high levels of turnover and the lack of qualified instructors, her agency changed her supervisor three times. This made it very difficult for Marilyn to understand expectations and she continually had to build a trusting relationship with a new person to help her in the learning experience. Due to these gaps in supervision, Marilyn had to rely heavily on her coworkers for support. Fortunately, as mentioned previously, she said, “Everybody always chipped in if I had any questions.” Thus, most of her feedback and learning experiences came from coworkers, as discussed in the preceding section.

High-level and non-social work supervisor disconnects. As mentioned above, many agency supervisors have higher-level positions as managers, department directors, or even agency or executive directors, in some cases. Although that can bring with it many positives, such as a potentially increased level of knowledge and experience, the participants communicated that it can also mean the supervisor seems to be out of touch with the introductory-level job functions. Some participants struggled with trying to ask questions of and learning from a supervisor who was not actively working on the same tasks at the same level.

Rebecca shared that she was appreciative of her supervisor’s experience but did not feel as though she directly benefited from it. “She was more of a director of the entire department, so I wish I would have worked more with a supervisor or someone who was more familiar with the field itself.” She relied on her coworkers to orient and train her on entry-level tasks, since they were the ones completing them. Lynn had a similar experience with her supervisor during her

internship. When asked what she would have done differently, she suggested, “I probably would have sought supervision from someone who worked in the department instead of oversaw the whole organization because I felt like her experience was not what I was experiencing.” Lastly, Annie mentioned that she would meet for supervision but they would not be on the same page about expectations, because, “...my supervisor has a completely different job.” Because her supervisor did not understand the tasks on the Annie’s level, she was not able to provide the, even adequate, supervision and oversight that Annie needed when she was learning how to be a social worker.

Additionally, participants unanimously agreed that it was crucially important to have a supervisor who held a social work degree. Besides wanting to have their field experiences with someone with the same interests and credentials, it was important that the supervisor understood the expectations and competencies of the social work field, so they could ensure appropriate learning tasks and opportunities were offered. This is addressed in both schools’ student field practicum handbooks. One university explicitly states the expectation:

The field instructor should have a BSW or an MSW from CSWE-accredited social work program and have worked at the agency for at least six months and have at least two years post-social work degree practice experience. (University 1, p.16)

Likewise, the other school states, “The...Social Work Department requires that all senior field instructors for baccalaureate students hold a CSWE-accredited baccalaureate or master’s social work degree” (University 2, p. 87). These appear to be clear-cut expectations, but a loophole exists as an exception to the rules.

Possibly because of the lack of appropriate or willing agencies, there is a contingency written into the supervisory requirements:

If an agency representative is interested in working with students, but does not have an undergraduate social work degree or MSW, the BSW Field Education Director considers the reasons the applicant may be a good choice as a supervisor. (University 1, p. 17)

And, from University 2: “In agencies without field instructors that hold a CSWE-accredited BSW or MSW, the social work department may assist students in locating a qualified field instructor in order for the agency to be approved as a placement setting” (p. 79). Thus, as indicated from the participants’ comments during the interviews and from the handbooks, supervisors could be chosen if the school feels they would be able to provide appropriate supervision despite lacking the necessary degree.

Lindsay and Rebecca had similar experiences with a supervisor who did not hold a social work degree. Lindsay shared that her supervisor’s “background was not social work, so I felt like I was educating her at times about my competencies.” She felt that, when she was asking questions, her supervisor was not equipped to answer them because she was not educated in the field. Similarly, Rebecca shared her experience. “She was quiet and not receptive to social worker education and I couldn’t process with anyone.” Rebecca felt that she did not have an appropriate person to share concerns with, problem-solve, reflect, and talk through difficult or confusing situations regarding social work best practices or ethical dilemmas, because that person was not coming from a social work education perspective. Supervision with an MSW was helpful if it that person could consistently follow-through with supervision times and understand the intricacies they were facing in their specific departments.

Participating in the agency’s community of practice by shadowing and interacting with coworkers at the agency was possibly the most influential aspect of the participants’ learning experiences. This allowed students to receive needed support, guidance, and exposure to a

variety of work styles. Additionally, despite the emphasis on the role of the supervisor in the university handbooks, due to their lack of availability or unfamiliarity with the interns' tasks and the fact that they were often removed from the front-line clinicians providing the actual experiences for the students, supervisors took a backseat in their role in most participants' learning.

Limited Gender Consciousness

The last main theme that was discussed in the interviews was gender consciousness that did or did not exist for participants during their field practicum experience. All participants were required to take at least one course during their studies that focused on marginalization and gender to some degree. Those courses will be described in detail below. This intentional focus did begin to provide a more critical perspective to participants, many of whom shared that they had never encountered before and was important to increase their awareness of issues and barriers that clients may be facing.

Program Contributions to Gender Consciousness

The course requirements for each school of social work were examined for this study and both university student handbooks describe the required courses in their curriculum as well as their purpose. One university required a pluralism course that discussed marginalization issues related to a number of topics, including race, gender, sexuality, and religion. The student handbook offering course descriptions states:

This course will provide students with an understanding of the social and historical contexts and the mechanisms which perpetuate prejudice, discrimination and inequality in the United States and globally. This course prepares students to engage in advocacy for human rights, social justice and economic justice with individuals, social systems and

structures. Topics will include race, gender, class, culture, religion, disabilities, sexual orientation and other areas of marginalization. (University 2, p. 57)

The other university required a course with a title specifically related to gender, but after reviewing the syllabus and receiving information during participant interviews, the course would more accurately be described as a course on issues related to sexuality and sexual orientation. Eva described it as, “a very intensive class on sexual orientation.” Participants describe the courses in more detail below. The university did not have syllabi available online and no participants from that school had any of their old copies, but their course outline for the social work program required two courses that considered gender in their course descriptions: Gender Issues for Helping Professionals and Understanding Diversity for Social Work Practice. The university’s public website offered descriptions for both courses. The description for Understanding Diversity in Social Work Practice included, “work with, but is not limited to, populations of people who are oppressed due to race, culture, religion, ability, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or other minority status groups in society.” The description for Gender Issues for Helping Professionals included, “Examines institutionalized gender socializations, current gender issues and controversies... Students are encouraged to develop heightened self-awareness about their gender-related attitudes.” Participants shared how those classes influenced their awareness of issues that their clients may be facing.

Recognizing marginalization in society. Marilyn discussed the course she took related to gender and shared,

We talked about gender intersectionality and... different intersections that make you high risk, that allow you to be more privileged. We talked about pay gaps, we talked about mental illness and gender, socialization in children, the media in gender. We talked about

a lot of things. One of the biggest things that I struggled with was that I come from a very devout Christian faith where homosexuality and LGBT is so wrong. That was a big struggle for me- my social work mind tells me one thing, and there's a little conflict of belief for a long time until I sat down and processed it.

Having a forum to discuss these differences allowed Marilyn the space to process her thoughts about working with clients with different sexualities, as well as recognizing the connection between gender and pay gaps and how the media influences how gender is seen in society.

Megan had a similar experience, sharing:

We talked about how you identify gender and stuff like that...There was one thing that took a turn while we were in that class and something that changed and that was a big discussion about progress. That class just really made me more aware.

Bringing concerning societal issues to light in class made Megan more aware of continued issues that were occurring, as well as progress being made to combat those issues.

Eva took the same class as Megan, but at a different time. She shared,

I did take a gender class, which was one of the required courses for the social work degree. So, I took that and it was about gender issues. The only class that was focused on gender was my genders class, but it was a topic that came up in other classes... I chose to focus on the policies surrounding gender and sexual orientation not being considered a human right by the government, still. It actually woke me up politically and helped me realize how behind we are and how LGBTQ+ population are not protected from discrimination.

Eva went beyond the general requirements of the course to become more active in supporting the LGBTQ+ community because of the course.

Lindsay summarized the purpose of the class overall,

It was just about being able to relate with everyone. We had a transgender male to female come in to speak with us and that was something that I personally hadn't had experience with because I grew up in a quiet Christian family, went to Christian school and so that was a new experience for but it was a good. And it helped prepare me because I did end up having a transgender client as well.

The classes provided the participants with more critical awareness of a wide spectrum of issues that still pervade society as a whole and they had positive feelings towards that experience, even if those issues were not related to the field of social work specifically and more directed towards societal issues as a whole.

Limitations on gender marginalization discourse. Most of the participants were not able to make a connection from the critical discussions from class related to the clients they may interact with to the issues that exist within the social work field itself. For example, after sharing about her LGBTQ+ political activism, Lindsay went on to say, "We did talk about how women are typically paid less than males, but that's typically in the business world and not in the social work careers. Here everyone makes a low amount equally." Despite her awareness the gender issues still exist within society, it did not occur to her that they also invade the field of social work.

The required courses that the participants needed to take to graduate are described more specifically below, and few of the courses appeared to directly confront issues associated with the influence of sociocultural factors or gender, specifically, on social work academia, on the social work field, nor on the clients served by social workers. Each university only had one required course that even mentioned gender in the description, though they were not specifically related to

gender in the social work field. Overall, there was a lack of required classes in the social work curriculum related to gender marginalization in the field of social work that was not related specifically to sexuality (Scott, 1986; Morley & MacFarlane, 2012; Weed, 2011). There were also discrepancies in the gender demographics of social work professors and social work field instructors (Carter, Smith, & Osteen, 2017; McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011; Perry & Cree, 2003) compared to the gender make-up of social work students, and misinformation or a lack of information regarding gender issues in the social work field.

Hillary, Annie, and Rebecca took the same course on gender issues at the same university but during different semesters. They all described the class content almost identically. When asked what was discussed in the class, Hillary said, “Sexuality as socialization and how gender is a socialized concept. Identity and gender identity.” Similarly, Annie said, “I did take a genders class which was one of the required courses for the social work degree. It was about gender and sexuality and inclusion.” Lastly, Rebecca, illustrating a lack of understanding of the differences between gender and sexual orientation despite an apparent focus on those issues during the class, described, “I had a whole semester on gender. Basically, it just covered gender equality. The professor who taught it was a lesbian and I thought it was smart coming from the perspective of someone who could really teach that class.” When asked if any other courses discussed gender issues or marginalization or considered gender during discussion, Rebecca said, “The only class that was focused on gender was my genders class.”

Lynn and Paige took the same course at their university, but during different semesters. When asked what classes they took that included gender as a discussion, Lynn said, “We took sociology and a genders class.” Although gender was not a main topic, it was discussed in her sociology class. Paige had the same required class and described her experience as a student:

We did the diversity and equality class and we talked about gender for a little bit and the debate about the transgender bathroom issue because that was a big deal, so we talked about that. But, other than that, not really.

All participants said that there was never a discussion about gender issues specifically in the social work field. Additionally, there were also no discussions related to the gender demographic composition of faculty within social work academia, which would likely be students' first encounters with gender disparity in the social work field when they begin their schooling.

Social work faculty demographics. In order to explore and understand the relevance of the gender of the faculty in social work academia that would have been observed by the participants, it is important to remember that the social work student demographic is 87% female and 13% male, as noted in previous chapters. This is important to note because, ideally, professors would be closely representative to the gender demographics of the field if the majority of graduates are female. Both social work programs provide a list of faculty members on their websites. Although each professor's preferred gender cannot be assumed, the demographics provided here are based on the information available on each school's website. At the private university, the social work department chair is male and there are two associate professors who are female. This means that 33% of the faculty are male, with a male holding the highest position. Since this university is smaller, students are introduced to faculty members in other departments for non-social work classes or electives, but what they see in their department is a male figure in the position of prominence. At the public university, the social work department chair and the program director are female; a professor is female; there are two female associate professors and one male; two female assistant professors; and one male and one female adjunct

professor on staff. This means that 20% of the faculty are male and 80% of the faculty are female; but, in this case, in contrast to the private university, there are females in the higher-level positions. While neither university is exactly representative of the gender demographics in their student population, the public university is much closer to doing so than the private one. In effect, then, although the great majority of graduate and entry-level practitioners are female, they are not seeing that the same demographics are represented within social work academia.

Many of the participants noticed that they had male professors, despite having almost no male students in their class, but not many of them were concerned by this. In fact, some participants shared that they preferred it to be that way. Paige had much to share related to this topic:

The male professors I had I probably enjoyed more. My first human services instructor was the director of [an agency] and we did very little classwork because he took us on field trips to volunteer. I think that women, while some of them are good, I think that some of them want to sugarcoat it. I was refreshed to get the male teacher's perspective of it because I thought the male teachers brought more to the table, quite frankly, than the female teachers did. Men have a tendency to just lay it out how it is and I felt like they didn't sugar coat it. I always got a whole lot more out of professors who were male or who were minorities because they brought a whole different perspective and not this privilege to it.

She went on to explain that it seemed to her that she observed reverse gender marginalization at work: "Some of the females felt like they were above the males. Because this [the field of social work] is the opposite, it's a female-dominated world and there's a male minority, so that always bothered me." Hillary concurred with Paige's feelings about one of her

professors, “My one professor was the director of his organization and his expectations were higher.” Both of these participants felt that the male professors provided higher-quality instruction and were able to introduce them to more diverse experiences because of their community connections and the positions of authority they held within their agencies.

Most other participants did not necessarily feel that having male professors was better or more positive than female professors; in fact, they appeared to be indifferent to the gender of their instructors. Eva said, “It was a good mix, my professors were both males and females. The program director was female and the president [of the university] was male.” Although the professor demographics were not necessarily representative of the social work student or social work practitioner demographic, this was not obvious to the participants at the time. As discussed in Chapter Two, the discrepancies seen within the social work professor demographics mirror discrepancies that exist within the field (Pease, 2011). The same issues that occurred when discussing gender disparities in social work faculty occurred during discussions about the field placements; although one or two participants noticed disparities within the gender demographics at their field practicum agencies, most did not. Upon closer examination it could be determined that discrepancies or concerns related to gender did exist, they were just unseen by the participants at the time.

Unseen Gender Disparities during Field Placements

Although not related to the actual tasks and social work skill acquisition that occurs during the field placement, societal, institutional, and systemic issues related to gender are an important part of the practice of social work and the field as a whole. As noted above, these issues as they related to social work did not appear to be present in the programs’ curricula nor in the course discourse, possibly resulting in unpreparedness upon graduation. To explore this

issue, the second interview guide (see Appendix) asked general questions about any topics related to gender that were encountered during the field practicum experience and about female leadership in the field. As a group, the participants varied in their awareness of gender disparities in the field, and some only because of extensive probing by the interviewer. These concepts were apparent through overt recognition and descriptions by a few participants. In some cases, the recognition occurred over time as participants explained the gender demographics and management hierarchy at their field placements, which illustrated covert issues they had not realized prior to the interviews. In a few cases, interviewees' responses revealed gender marginalization to the interviewer, while it remained unrecognized to the interviewee.

Gender position discrepancies were apparent to some of the participants at their field placement agencies and revealed itself during the practicum. Lindsay shared that she noticed immediately that there were more men in positions of authority at her agency:

Lindsay: In the foster care department, we have zero men. In [the agency] in total in this branch, we have three men.

Interviewer: Are they caseworkers?

Lindsay: Two are therapists and one is the lead branch director.

Interviewer: Does it seem odd that there aren't any caseworkers that are men?

Lindsay: Yes, it does. This is something that I have talked about with one of my coworkers many times.

Interviewer: Do you notice any other discrepancies like that in the field?

Lindsay: Now that you mention it, yes. Working with county agencies, a lot of women are case managers and the operators of the program are men."

Interviewer: What about the higher directors?

Lindsay: Mostly male, but one female was just hired on as director.

She said, “It makes me feel more positive that [the new female director] was promoted.” Since Lindsay noticed that there were more men than women in positions of power, seeing the promotion of a woman to a director made her feel more positively about the role of women within the hierarchy of social work positions in her agency.

In Lynn’s experience, it was also obvious that there were many men. “Our director... is male, and then the other guy who is the head honcho of billing and stuff, he’s male. Then, there was one guy there who was also a top person, so it was mostly male.” Megan said also pointed out that:

Even when I think of other agencies, they are set up similarly, with a man as the administrator and a lot of case managers were women. One supervisor got promoted and he wasn’t even working with the agency for a year, and he was the only man working on the team at the time. There was another way more qualified person on the team who was female and she did not get the position and everyone on our team was like, “What?” Because he was not, and is still not, qualified. So, that was weird. But, I don’t naturally think like that. I just don’t naturally think that is the reason.

In Megan’s case, she appeared not to consider that fact that gender plays a role in hiring or promotion within her agency.

In other cases, participants felt as though there were appropriate male/female ratios, although upon further description of the gender make-up of the agency, it became apparent that it was not equal. Megan shared her experience and, despite her previous comments about the hiring

of a male over a female, admitted that she felt that having so many men in social work leadership positions was a positive thing:

Megan: There's not a lot of men in the children and youth services field, but we work with a lot of providers who do have a lot of male influence and male providers. I've talked to several of the therapists that have been men who are LCSWs [Licensed Clinical Social Workers], but that's a good thing I think."

Interviewer: Do you feel like you've ever experienced or have seen other people experience issues due to a gender disparity?

Megan: Honestly, no. I haven't seen much of it because I work with all women, so most of the positions that we go out for between my coworkers and I, we don't want an HR position. The whole reason I chose social worker is so that I can be in the community and helping others, so I don't really want that.

Interviewer: So you are not interested in the jobs that men have?

Megan: Right. The majority of our agency is female. Both of my supervisors are male.

Interviewer: So how do you feel about the prospects of being able to move up in your agency?

Megan: Umm, specifically as a female, I think I would be as equal as anyone else.

Interviewer: If you were going up against a male do you think it would be equal?

Megan: See, I don't know because I don't know [the commissioners] that well. The people who choose [who are hired are] the administrators here and the commissioners. The commissioners are all male.

Interviewer: The commissioners for the state?

Megan: Yes, they're all male.

Despite continued probing, Megan was not bothered by this gender contradiction in her workplace. Lindsay's agency had a similar gender distribution, but she felt, "The CEO was amazing and he had a great team working under him that was mostly female." Because he had a team of females, she felt that women were well-represented, even if they were not in a powerful position.

Some participants also discussed their interactions with other professionals who were not social workers. Rebecca described her experience: "When we're dealing with detectives and police officers, they are usually male, and the social workers and caseworkers are usually female." The insinuation, that traditionally-gendered roles should be expected and accepted, continued into the field of the veteran's affairs and the prison system, where Marilyn had classmates completing their field placements. She said,

One of the interns interned in the prison system... inmates harassed her, discredited her, weren't forthcoming. They made it hard for her to do her job. I also had another classmate who did her internship at the VA so she would tell us different ways on how she would connect with the veterans being a female working with a mostly males. And how she had to prove herself. It was a military sort of thing. She would have to start her intakes with a crude, lewd sort of statement to lighten the air.

Marilyn openly explained that when you are a female working with males you need to prove yourself, and this was expected because they had been in the military or in prison. She did not feel that it was odd, or should not be the case, it just *was*.

Overall, few of the participants were aware of gender disparities or issues within their field practicum agencies prior to their interviews. Only a few even noticed the disparity as they were describing it in their interview, while still others did not see it as an issue even when it was

specifically pointed out to them. Additionally, none of the participants noticed disparity in social work professor demographics or positions held despite neither university having faculty representative to the gender demographics of the field. Lastly, some of the participants expressed gratitude to have men in higher-level positions in both social work academia and social work field agencies and did not see gender disparity as either existing or being an issue at their agency.

Conclusion

Data for this study were collected from participant interviews and related documents. Analysis of the data suggest that there are four main findings: (a) the need for adequate preparation for selection and beginning the field practicum (b) the importance of learning through direct practice; (c) the influential role of coworkers; and (d) limited gender consciousness within social work academia and the social work field. The findings within these categories provide support for needed changes within the academic social work curriculum and within the field experience itself. The significance of the findings and the suggested implications for social work education is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to explore how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce; and (2) to examine how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the gender gap that exists within the field of social work during that experience. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation?
2. What are the perceptions of recent social work graduates of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences?

Four main findings, as presented in Chapter Four, resulted from the qualitative exploration of the questions: (a) the need for adequate preparation for selecting and beginning the field practicum (b) the importance of learning through direct practice; (c) the influential role of coworkers; and (d) limited gender consciousness within social work academia and the social work field.

This chapter will begin with an analysis of the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks and foundational research literature that informed the study, including how the findings answer the research questions. Additionally, the implications of these findings for the social work field, social work academia, and adult education will be explored, along with suggestions for future research. This chapter will conclude with final thoughts and reflections.

Findings in Light of the Theoretical Frameworks

This study was grounded in three theoretical frameworks, as outlined in detail in Chapter Two: experiential learning, communities of practice, and critical feminism. The first two frameworks lend themselves to understanding the first research question exploring how social workers within their first years of practicing after graduation view the extent to which their learning experiences during their field practicum influenced their preparedness to enter the workforce. Critical feminist theory assisted in answering the second research question, related to how they interacted with, understood, and made meaning of the ways gender influences many aspects of the field of social work during that experience.

A Need for Adequate Preparation to Select and Begin the Field Practicum

To explore the first research question and in order to understand how social work graduates experienced their field practicum as a way to prepare for working in the field, the initial questions during the interviews focused on their preparation to begin their practicum. Existing research suggests that preparation to begin the field placement ranks as a top factor in students' rating their learning experiences as successful (Kanno & Koeske, 2010, Narayanan et al., 2010). Students who felt like they knew the expectations of the field practicum felt like they had better experiences. The first step towards preparing for the practicum is selecting an agency. Two participants who were able to choose their own agency explained that it was a great help to their learning, because they were able to choose what they were interested in and to pursue it in-depth during their field practicum. Unfortunately, most other participants reported that they were provided little advance notice of the need to select a placement and others seemed to push particular agencies onto students, even if they were not interested in that area of practice. It is important to consider this in light of experiential learning, as Fenwick (2001) argues that experiential learning is most effective when it is extremely personal and the learner has an

interest in the experience. Students who are able to choose agencies that align with their interests will likely have a more personal connection and an interest in the learning experiences offered there.

After an agency is chosen, a thorough orientation and set-up to begin placement is expected (CSWE, 2016). One participant who described her thorough orientation expressed more satisfaction with the quality of her field placement. This participant had to complete multiple online trainings as well as introductions with all agencies in the community that her agency interfaced with or that provided community resources to their clients. This gave her a larger picture and understanding of the social service delivery structure in her community.

Unfortunately, other participants in this study discussed that their agency orientations fell short of what they were expecting. This lack was often perceived as a shortcoming of the agencies, which, from the perspective of the participants, provided inadequate introduction to the agency's mission, tasks, and expectations; this was despite the field practicum handbooks' explicit instructions to provide it. Without a thorough introduction, participants felt that they struggled to understand what their tasks and expectations were at their respective agencies, which could have provided a foundation on which students could build knowledge through experiential learning opportunities at the field practicum.

The Importance of Learning Through Direct Practice

Experiential learning as a theoretical lens can be utilized to add more information to answering research questions one. Three of the four major findings in this study were related to how to maximize learning through experiences and can be better understood with an experiential learning perspective. All CSWE-accredited schools are required to have students complete a field practicum in which "field education is the signature pedagogy for social work" (CSWE,

2015, p. 12). This pedagogical philosophy of utilizing experiential opportunities as a tool for learning is well-supported in both adult education and social work literature (Benander, 2009; Cheung & Delavega, 2014; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Austin and Rust (2015) point out, “experiential learning is simply defined as “hands on” learning and may involve any of the following activities: service learning, applied learning in the discipline, co-operative education, internships, study abroad, and experimental activities” (p. 1). Internships, or field practicum experiences, are listed specifically as a tool for students to engage in experiential learning.

Experiential learning highlights the importance of concrete experiences and reflection on those experiences as the keys to learning, particularly in adulthood (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The emphasis on the field practicum in social work education, like in most health-related and practice-oriented professions, illustrates that experiential learning, including observations, learning about, and modeling behaviors, is understood to be the keystone to becoming a qualified, practicing professional (CSWE, 2015, 2016) .

Participants felt that they needed to have the opportunity to interact with clients, spend time in the field, observe entire processes, and have their own caseloads, if at all possible. These opportunities to see and connect with clients and coworkers, work through challenges, and solve problems demonstrate experiential learning’s foundational elements of engaging with experiences, reflecting on them, and then experimenting by trying those skills on their own (Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Participants who were able to engage in some of those experiences, such as maintaining an autonomous workload or having a thorough agency introduction, cited those elements as being an integral part to their learning. The participants who were unable to experience those things recognized that this type of learning would have

allowed them to feel confident and prepared as they entered their workplaces. They also noted that they missed many of these learning opportunities due to inappropriate task assignments.

The Influential Role of Coworkers

One type of these learning experiences noted as particularly significant by the participants was their interactions with coworkers. As Wenger (1998) notes, the theoretical framework of communities of practice, talks about learning in a particular community where one becomes socialized into the community and goes from being an outsider to more of an insider to the practice community in this case, the social work community of practice. These communities develop when people come together who have similar interests and discuss problems, solutions, and best practices together to engage in communal knowledge construction and learning (Jakovljevic, Buckley, & Buchney, 2013; Wenger, 1998). This is an already-established phenomenon in the social work literature as a support for student learning (Edmonds-Cady & Sosulski, 2010; Klein, 2008; Staempfli et al., 2016; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In these social interactions, social work professionals at the agencies, both in the field and in the agency offices, interact with their colleagues in communities. These communities provide opportunities to consult and reflect on their practices and issues in the field and in their agencies, and is reflective of findings in related fields, such as healthcare that confirm influence of communities of practice in learning, due to the interactions between the inexperienced student learners and the experienced mentor clinicians in the field (Morely, 2016; Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2017).

Through their inclusion in the social circles and work at the agencies, observing their soon-to-be colleagues, modeling what they saw, learning the culture and often unspoken rules of the workplace, and gaining a deeper understanding of the social work field, the shadowing

student interns were provided with opportunities to observe and participate in these communities of practice. Their coworkers provided guidance and opportunities to see different work styles and solutions to problems, bringing the interns from the periphery of the community into the community itself. As discussed in Chapter Two, Jarvis (2006) posits that there are two types of experiential learning: non-reflective and reflective, with reflective learning being an important part of learning from experiences. This essential reflection step often takes place in communities of practice. Students' participation in hands-on experiences and working within communities of practice provided them with invaluable insight regarding how to become a social work professional in the field, as well as with opportunities for reflection to solidify the skills that they observe and practice during learning experiences, confirming the existing findings in the research literature (Rohde, Klamma, Jarke, & Vulf, 2007; Woodside, Zeigler, & Paulus, 2009). These community interactions were not structured times specifically meant for learning; nevertheless, the informal, impromptu participation in everyday activities with professionals in the field allowed for crucial learning and reflective occasions that the interns would not have had otherwise.

The field supervisors also influenced interns' learning. Some expressed the value of their interactions with their supervisors, who were available and accessible and who, then, served in similar capacities to those described above for the coworkers. For those less fortunate interns, they were not able to take advantage of their supervisors' knowledge, skill, and guidance. While on the surface, this lack of interaction appears to be a negative aspect of the interns' experiences; in fact, it may have been the unavailability of the supervisors that resulted in the interns' closer relationships with their influential coworkers, resulting in their inclusion in the existing communities of practices at the agencies.

The above findings: the importance of the selection and preparation to begin the field practicum experience and of the availability of direct practice experiences, directly respond to the first research question: How do recent social work graduates feel their field practicum impacted their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation? This study showed that participants felt they were more prepared if they were able to have a say in their field placement, felt oriented to their expectations at the agency, and had opportunities for direct practice experience. The findings also support literature in social work and related fields that promote utilizing communities of practice as an arena for increased students learning.

Limited Gender Consciousness in Social Work Academia and the Field

As discussed extensively in Chapter Two, critical theory (Herz & Johansson, 2012; Keenan, 2004; Makinnon, 2009; Morley & MacFarlane, 2012) and feminist theory (Forcey & Nash, 1998; Sands & Nuccio, 1992; Swingoski, 1994; Zhang, 2019) have been effectively utilized to foreground social work literature and research for decades. Unfortunately, due to lack of uniform use of the term and its more recent introduction to the field, critical feminist theory has not yet been as extensively used or explored in the social work literature. Some authors have utilized a critical feminist approach without calling it such (Eyal-Lubing & Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Saulnier, 2000; Turner & Maschi, 2015), while even fewer authors specifically say they are using a critical feminist lens in their social work research (Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, & Wahab, 2013; Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015).

Critical feminist theory, based on concepts that originated in critical theory and feminism (Brookfield, 2005), seeks to confront and foreground injustices and barriers that women face because of their gender. This theory also maintains that all of the societal assumptions about gender that exist have been socially- and historically-constructed and are deeply imbedded in

society's subconscious (Butler & Weed, 2011). Critical feminist theory, then, is a helpful framework for exploring the gender disparities that exist in the schools of social work and the agencies, as discussed in social work literature (Holosko et al., 2016; McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011).

When viewed through this lens, and as described by the participants, the social work programs do not appear to prepare students adequately to recognize, acknowledge, and confront issues of gender inequality in the workplace. Participants' ability to do all three of those things with regard to gender disparities fell into three categories: a) they recognize and acknowledge the disparities; b) they recognized them repeatedly prompted to do so; or c) they did not seem to recognize or be concerned about any issues associated with gender. None expressed knowledge of how to confront these issues. In fact, some participants defended these discrepancies by, either explaining that the males had better perspectives or experience, or that women did not want the types of jobs that men had at the agency.

From a critical feminist perspective, whether the participants identified concerns related to gender or not, their responses solidified concerns about their preparedness to begin their professional careers in an environment that appears to reflect a subconscious societal and institutional socialization that perpetuates gender inequalities in society. Beyond gender disparities in the field of social work, the lack of consistency in the understanding of gender issues amongst the study participants also illuminates a secondary area of concern, albeit a potentially more serious one. Although social workers are present in a wide variety of community organizations and institutions, including schools, hospitals, senior centers, prisons, military, corporations, and other public and private agencies (National Association of Social Workers, 2019), they often work with vulnerable populations that are also traditionally

marginalized in society. Without a critical understanding of how institutions and society perpetuate marginalization that affects the daily lives of their client population, social workers may lack the ability to effectively assist them (Forcey & Nash, 1998; Herz & Johanssen, 2012; Zhang, 2019).

The above findings related to participants exhibiting a limited gender consciousness within social work academia and within the social work field directly responds to the second research question: What are the perceptions of recent social work graduates of the effects of how gender played a role, positively or negatively, in their field practicum experiences? My study showed that most participants were not aware of discrepancies related to gender at their field placement agencies which confirms the literature that exists that calls for incorporating critical feminist theory in social work practice (Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, and Wahab, 2013; Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015).

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education and Practice

This section will discuss the implications of the findings of this study as they are related to social work education and field practicum experiences. The discussion will emphasize the need for: a thorough preparation to begin the field practicum; consideration of the needs of nontraditionally-aged undergraduate students; and inclusion of a multitude of direct practice experiences. Additionally, recommendations to maximize the role of the coworker and the supervisor, as well as to prepare students to encounter gender issues, expand their critical feminist perspective in the field, and address gender in social work academia are discussed. Although this study was limited in scope, the experiences of the participants can assist current students, future students, field instructors, social work programs, and social work professors in

understanding the things they are doing well and the possibilities for change that should be considered.

Thorough Preparation for the Field Practicum

Participants suggested ideas to prevent the mis-placements that some students experienced. They believed that the schools of social work should provide students with earlier notice of the upcoming need to choose a practicum agency. This way, the interns-to-be could do adequate research on which agencies would meet their learning needs and interests. Without time to do the necessary research, participants felt that they had to choose available agencies out of desperation or rely on the school's relationships with agencies to find a placement. Ideally, schools would provide a timeline to assist students with expectations related to securing a field placement, as well as pertinent information related to types of agencies and potential learning experiences. As noted previously, participants in this study demonstrated that those social work interns who were able to select an appropriate placement reported feeling more satisfied with their experience. Additionally for orientation to the agencies, the model described by the participant who chose her placement agency could be used as an example of best practices for other agencies. Multiple participants suggested that thorough orientations or on-boarding programs that are designed and required for students beginning their practicum would be helpful so that students understood the agency's mission and purpose and were oriented to their assigned tasks and how those tasks fit into the larger picture of the agency's functions.

Consider the Needs of Nontraditional Undergraduate Social Work Students

Almost half of the participants in this study were older than 25 years old, and, thus, considered nontraditional students. Their life and work experiences and the knowledge gleaned from those experiences can differentiate them from traditionally-aged higher education students

(18 to 24 years old), who may not have had time to experience living on their own, working, or having a family. To be sure, it is possible that younger students may have these experiences, but the differentiation between age groups due to life experiences is well-established within the adult education literature, as discussed in Chapter Two (Dewey, 1916; Knowles, 1975; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Lindeman, 1926). Additionally, specific needs of nontraditional students are well-documented (MacDonald, 2018; Ross-Gordon, 2011) and include the challenge of time management for balancing work, life, and school responsibilities. The findings from my study complement the existing literature that supports the need to consider nontraditional student needs related to education. These participants expressed concerns with how their schools of social work handled their field practicum experience requirements in light of their prior knowledge and experience and their current life needs. Realistically, however, individual schools of social work do not have an option to change the requirements if they want to remain accredited by CSWE (2015, 2016).

The nontraditional student participants believed that their previous work experience should have been considered to replace some of the course and field requirements in the program. Additionally, their needs related to time and availability should be addressed. As related by some of the participants, more agencies are needed to provide learning experiences for students who work full-time jobs or have other responsibilities during daytime hours. Undergraduate social work students will need to continue to advocate for themselves to make sure their needs are appropriately met and that they have a say in their practicum agency selection. A few nontraditional participants who attempted to advocate for their needs felt they were met with resistance from the schools. Specifically, nontraditionally-aged social work students' feedback should be solicited by CSWE and by schools of social work. They might

utilize this feedback to inform a flexible model that would meet the required competencies, while also respecting the individual needs of nontraditional students and appreciating the skills and knowledge they bring into their programs. All of these recommendations would support more productive learning from field experiences, which will be discussed in more detail next.

Provide Numerous and Appropriate Direct Practice Field Experiences

Experiential learning through direct practice is a well-documented tool and must be utilized as a defining characteristic of all social work programs. The findings from my study both confirm and expand upon the research literature (Benander, 2009; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Milne & Adams, 2015) that supports the necessity of direct practice for learning in social work. My study further illustrates the importance of practical experiences as valuable tools to facilitate learning and prepare students to demonstrate competent skills. Without these potentially autonomous, in the field, opportunities and observations of complete processes, it is unlikely that students could meet all of the CSWE competencies (2015, 2016) for practical social work experience.

Social work interns can benefit most from tasks that are appropriate for learning, rather than from administrative assistant duties. As noted previously, the pedagogical foundation of CSWE (2015, 2016) accreditation indicates the organization's view of the importance of direct practice. My study reveals that some field practicum agencies may fall short in this regard, but should provide interns with appropriate, varied, and useful learning tasks and experiences. Ensuring that the tasks assigned to students are appropriate is vital to student growth (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2010).

Another concern illuminated by my study is also related to CSWE's (2016) requirements, this time for social work students' competencies upon graduation. The ability to work directly

with clients is expected, but some participants were only allowed to observe client-coworker interactions and were not able to practice these skills on their own. A few participants, who were able to carry their own caseloads and meet with clients autonomously, saw these experiences as a positive aspect of their experience and beneficial to preparing to enter the workforce upon graduation. On the other hand, participants who did not have those opportunities expressed that independent client interaction would have prepared them more effectively for working than observations. Shadowing and observing clinicians and then practicing autonomously is important to learn these skills, and the lack of opportunity to practice them robs the student of the learning experience that comes from trial and error and from receiving informed feedback from a supervisor, colleagues, and/or clients.

Cheung and Delavega's (2014) Five-Way Experiential Learning Model addresses student experiences and is specifically applicable to the social work field practicum. The fifth element added to the traditional four-step cycle (Kolb, 1984) is formative integration, which accounts for the importance of seeing an entire process to then replicate it in the future. When students can formatively integrate, they can "integrate all aspects of learning in the process and form the knowledge into a cohesive whole to make sense of it all and be able to apply skills fluidly and transtheoretically in the future" (p. 1074), an idea which complements Milne and Adams' (2015) conception of experiential learning as a space to integrate knowledge. Ideally, students would begin by watching clinicians work with clients and see complete processes from beginning to end, then later integrate their classroom learning with the observations and guidance from supervisors with their own experiences with clients. To allow time for this process to happen, one participant suggested lengthening the field practicum, which often lasts for only one semester. This is not a new concept, as international literature discusses the benefit of longer

exposure to client groups and complete systems (Rock & Ring, 2010). For example, seeing a client begin, receive, and then terminate services could fill in gaps in interns' knowledge and complete the integration process. Additionally, a longer field practicum would enhance students' resumes as a job candidate, especially for students who had no prior working experience.

It is possible that the whole structure of the field practicum experience could be changed to provide a more well-rounded experience for students that would prepare them for the workplace more effectively. Possibly an agency rotation would be helpful, during which students could rotate through two or three similar agencies, so they would be exposed to different supervisors, coworkers, and opportunities, but that would not also be so different as to require significant additional learning at the start of each rotation. This could help buffer supervision issues if certain agency supervisors are less available than others are, provide opportunities to meet with clients individually, and provide a more holistic understanding of the social service system.

A complete structural overhaul, however, would require a lot of work, especially on the part of the schools of social work in creating the rotation and working with the students and agencies to create smooth transitions. As it seems there are pieces lacking in the current structure, these kinds of institutional and structural changes would require much effort and time; but, the schools, students, agencies, and clients would only benefit if undergraduate students are well prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation. Beyond direct practice and appropriate and numerous experiential learning assignments, understanding how to maximize the important and influential role of coworkers in students' learning will be examined next.

Recognize the Important Roles of Coworkers and Supervisors

The role of social relationships when learning new skills and knowledge and developing professional identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) cannot be overlooked. In this case, the social workers at the agencies shared a community of practice, which became one significant way the interns learned from their coworkers. According to findings from this study and emphasizing other researchers' findings in communities of practice in social work (Edmonds-Cady & Sosulski, 2010; Staempfli et al., 2016) and related fields (Klein, 2008; Kothari, et al., 2015; Morely, 2016; Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2017; Rohde, Klamma, Jarke, & Vulf, 2007; Woodside, Zeigler, & Paulus, 2009), interactions with coworkers may be the most influential aspect of preparing students to be clinicians. Fostering communities of practice during the field experiences may be useful for schools of social work to explore.

With the guidance of coworkers, interns moved into the community of practice from the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and, thus, were exposed to and included in discussions about how professionals problem-solve, ask questions, reflect on clients, circumstances, and steps taken, and how they might change their practice when needed. Because empirical literature on social work students learning within social work communities of practice (Edmonds-Cady & Sosulski, 2010; Staempfli et al., 2016) is scarce, the findings from this study add support for the idea that participating in communities of practice is an essential, and possibly the most important, part of students' learning in social work programs. Participants who interacted frequently with their coworkers and supervisors believed the knowledge gained from them was an incredibly meaningful part of their field practice learning experience. Interns in these placements learned about unspoken expectations and culture of the workplace and the field, including the attitudes and power in the relationships between and among coworkers and supervisors. The coworkers provided a model of professional identity, behavior, and practice for

them. Every participant in this study mentioned that the coworkers they shadowed, asked questions of, reflected with, and learned from were equally, if not more important, than their supervisors.

Due to the nature of the social work field practicum, students are likely exposed to one or more communities of practice at their placement agency. The research from this study emphasizes the importance of the impact of the coworker on the student's learning experience. Communities of practice allow students to be brought into the fold of clinicians within an agency and they are exposed to more than surface-level discussion of real practice barriers, concerns, dilemmas, etc. as clinicians are experiencing them. This is valuable insight, especially since communities of practice largely form organically (Wenger, 1998), so interactions, questions, and feedback are genuine and not forced. Additionally, communities of practice assist with professional socialization in social work (Miller, 2013; Stempfli et al., 2016) for students as they are working towards becoming independent clinicians upon graduation. Professional socialization is a very important step in preparing clinicians for the workplace after graduation, as demonstrated in Chapter Two (Miller, 2013; Wiles, 2013). Learning the nuances of an agency, unspoken expectations and norms, and seeing the struggles of working clinicians provides learning opportunities for students that they may not experience and learn from if they could not participate in those communities of practice.

If the importance and the impact of learning within a community of practice were emphasized, schools of social work might spend time educating field practicum supervisors and entry-level clinicians on the impact they have on students' learning. If agencies, supervisors, and clinicians could purposefully attempt to maximize student inclusion, guide them into the social work communities, and engage in discourse with them, student-learning experiences may expand

in breadth and depth. Unfortunately, even in fields such as healthcare where communities of practice have been utilized for decades, instructors struggle with best practices related to encouraging communities of practice to form and moving students from the periphery of an already established community of practice closer into the center. As mentioned in Chapter Two, many workplaces are resistant to schools or instructors forcing the establishment of a community of practice that does not form organically (Kothari, et al., 2015). It may be tempting for schools of social work to attempt this in field practicum agencies, but it may not be an effective method. Jorgensen and Hadders (2015) and Molesworth (2017) suggest that a close relationship with the supervising clinician or the practicum supervisor from the school could assist with moving students to a more integrated position within the community of practice in nursing. Similarly for social work, the student may need to work to build relationships with coworkers in the agency and their supervisor may need to facilitate that or encourage coworker-student interactions in an attempt to maximize student participation in an already-established community of practice in the agency.

In light of this finding, schools of social work and partner agencies must be acutely aware of the importance of these connections and prepare their social workers for appropriate and useful interactions with interns. Coworkers of interns should be made aware of their influence and be given training and instruction on how to include students into their practice to assist in their learning. They should also understand that students are learning unspoken expectations and norms of the field, so coworkers should work hard to make sure they demonstrate the highest levels of competency and integrity while working in the field. Based on the findings from this study and the existing literature related to communities of practice (Edmonds-Cady & Sosulski, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991), students should be encouraged to

utilize these coworkers as resources in their learning, and coworkers should take that responsibility seriously.

Beyond enhancing and maximizing the role of the coworker in students' learning, the literature demonstrates that supervision and supervisor feedback can be an important aspect of students feeling prepared to work as a clinician when they graduate (Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2010). The few participants who received supervision from a qualified supervisor felt that they had the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences, engage in discourse regarding what went well and/or if there are concerns, and receive feedback, input, and criticism from an experienced social work supervisor. This study, then, supports the findings from other research and emphasizes the potential role of supervisors in student success post-graduation by being available, providing quality feedback, and ensuring students are adequately oriented to the agency and their learning tasks.

As a result, this study suggests that schools of social work agency examine agency adherence to the high standards dictated by their own student handbooks for providing qualified supervisors with appropriate supervision time. It would be helpful to explore perspectives of supervisors who are overseeing interns at agencies, and how they can be better supported by both schools of social work and the agencies they work for to better prepare and educate their interns. These perspectives may bring to light the reasons for issues related to lack of availability and degree qualifications. The next section addresses how gender disparities might influence the social work field.

Address Gender Disparities in Social Work Academia and Practice

Despite the fact that 87% of undergraduate social work students are female (CSWE, 2013), Carter, Smith, and Osteen (2017) report that more men hold more social work faculty

positions at all levels than women, which reflects higher education as a whole. Additionally, most tenured social work faculty, program administrators, directors, and policymakers are male (McPhail, 2004), and men continue to earn more money than women in equivalent positions (Holosko et al., 2016). These demographic differences in schools of social work are confirmed in the two schools examined in this study.

To call attention to these structural inadequacies, schools of social work should follow the recommendations of Mallinger et al. (2017), who suggest purposeful changes to the social work curriculum, which typically emphasizes male authors, researchers, and theorists. Pursuing new approaches and incorporating new literature from a female or feminist perspective could be helpful in encouraging students to recognize and acknowledge gender injustices and prepare them to encounter similar circumstances in the field. This recognition may encourage schools and students to take steps to correct historical and systematic gender inequality in the social work field (Herz & Johanssen, 2012; Pease, 2011). Mallinger et al. (2017) also suggest that social work programs should nurture leadership skills to empower students to confront and break down the barriers to leadership positions that may exist for them. If the conversation around gender issues within social work could become a norm, graduates may feel more comfortable and confident in bringing issues to light during their field practicum, or in the agency they work at upon graduation.

Expand Students' Critical Perspectives on Gender

Like social work academia, social work practice suffers from gender issues related to pay, promotion, and representation (McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011). Fortunately, some critical discussions of oppression and marginalization is happening in the social work programs and many participants found this exposure enlightening and made them aware of institutionalized

societal injustices (Brookfield, 2005). This course content even encouraged one to become politically active to support LGBTQ+ members of her community. Evidence from my study indicates that the topics in those classes focused on working with client groups, but did address the field of social work itself. These conversations should include discussion of gender issues within the social work field so students might critically analyze the underlying infrastructure that supports ingrained beliefs, assumptions, and values that oppress women (Gringeri & Roche, 2010) and, thus, prepare them for conditions in the field (Herz & Johanssen, 2012). Although critical discussions related to gender and feminist theory are not prominent topics in the participants' schools of social work, they are frequently addressed in other related fields, such as education (Brady & Kanpol, 2000; Schmeichel, 2015), which could easily be transferred into the schools of social work.

Social work students would also benefit from discussions in their schools of social work that begin with a critical feminist theoretical lens. Not surprisingly, in the same positions in the field, men have also consistently earned higher salaries than women in social work have. Women occupy the majority of social work roles, placing it into the female-dominated profession category; but this is an inaccurate perception. "Framing social work as a female-dominated profession hides sexism and male prejudice in social work. It is more accurate to refer to social work as a 'male-dominated female majority profession'" (Pease, 2011, p. 407). Because men hold positions of power politically and institutionally in the social work field, it is likely that social work students will be exposed to, though perhaps not consciously recognize, this disparity during their field practicum experiences. Participants in this study exhibited a range of gender awareness related to promotion or position, from no awareness to awareness accompanied by concern and uncertainty about how to address it. The lack of awareness may demonstrate the

subconscious maintenance of the status quo to which they have been socialized and, thus, are often not able to recognize, even in their own workplaces (Brookfield, 2005).

Like issues in social work academia, gender-related issues in the practice of social work should be acknowledged, addressed, and critiqued during social work programs. This conscious or subconscious learning of gender expectations within the field may deter students from fully realizing their potential, because their gender is not prominently represented in positions of power in the workplace (Carter, Smith, and Osteen, 2017; Holosko et al., 2016; McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011). If the conversation around gender issues within social work could become a norm in social work education, graduates may feel more comfortable and confident in bringing issues to light as they see them occurring.

Overall, this study offers many suggestions and implications for the social work field practicum, social work academia, and the field of social work as a whole. Within the practicum, students may feel more prepared to enter the workforce upon graduation if they have had ample direct practice experiences and have maximized the learning experiences available from and with their coworkers and supervisors. Additionally, adding a critical feminist perspective in both social work academia and social work practice would only add to the holistic understanding students need of both the field and their clients. Beyond the field of social work, this study has implications for the field of adult education, which include the age grouping of adults, confirmation of the benefits of experiential learning and communities of practice, and the expansion of critical feminist approaches in social work.

Implications and Recommendations for Adult Education

As noted previously, the number of nontraditionally-aged students (students over the age of 25) enrolling in undergraduate programs (NCES, 2017) is increasing. If the field of adult

education persists with the same age-based criteria for separating adult education from higher education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Jarvis, 2010), knowledge about the teaching and learning of this growing population will be missed. Moreover, Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25) would include all nontraditional and traditional students as adults, and as such, adult education learning theories could enhance student learning considerably by supporting adult learning needs and emphasizing the relevance and importance of previous experience for all undergraduate social work students, no matter their age. The findings from my study support the argument for inclusion of undergraduate students in studies in adult education, particularly research in fields that have a large number of students over the age of 25, as within social work education.

Although this study was limited in scope and included only social work professionals, lessons learned from the challenges faced by the four older participants call for consideration of their unique needs, particularly related to the field practicum, an event that is common in other fields that educate adults. If learning includes "new knowledge through intuition and the analysis of experience" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 37), my study can be interpreted as exemplifying a lack of appreciation for and emphasis on prior experience leading up to and during the field practicum of the nontraditionally-aged participants. In fact, all students would benefit from appreciation of the life experiences they bring with them.

Additionally, this study confirms the importance of exploring the role of communities of practice in the social work field practicum as a way to enhance students' learning experiences. As discussed previously, participants' specifically emphasized the importance interacting and collaborating with their coworkers during their practicum for understanding the field (Merriam et al., 2007). Cheung and Delavega's (2014) expansion on Kolb's (1984) model for experiential

learning may provide for more beneficial pedagogy and interpretation of integration through learning experiences for adults in other contexts. It is my recommendation that this expanded model be used in all fields that emphasize clinical or field education so that educators may have a more in-depth understanding of how both experiential learning opportunities and participating in communities of practice fully contribute to students' learning.

Lastly, adult education often focuses on societal injustices that can marginalize groups or people, for example, because of their race, gender, or class (Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 1970). Discussion of these injustices has also specifically addressed feminism (Tisdell, 1998) and critical feminism (Carpenter, 2010). My study expands this conversation around critical feminist theory into social work education, and possibly, to any other field that includes a clinical practicum. Adult students and students of all ages need tools to understand and critically examine gender disparities, explain why they exist, and encourage, educate, and equip students to confront and overcome them. These practical implications extend to the development of the learning theories used in the study and to research and are addressed in the next section.

Implications for Theory and Future Research

As well as informing adult education and social work education and field practices, the findings from this study offer insights that can be utilized in the understanding and development of adult learning theories related to social work education and other practice-oriented programs. Additionally, this study revealed opportunities for future research that would be useful for the social work and adult education fields, which are addressed in the next section.

Implications for Theory

Research viewing the social work field practicum from an experiential learning perspective (Austin & Rust, 2015; Benander, 2009; Cheung & Delavega, 2014; Huerta-Wong &

Schoech, 2010; Milne & Adams. 2015) agrees with the value placed on experiential learning by CSWE (2015, 2016) and the field handbooks from both universities. This study supports this theoretical underpinning of recognizing experiential learning as a keystone component for preparing competent social work clinicians. While not a new contribution to experiential learning theory, the findings further strengthen the importance of attending to what is actually happening in the field practicum to ensure those experiences happen and are effective.

As discussed extensively in Chapter Two, Kolb (1984) is credited with publishing the first Experiential Learning Theory Cycle that consists of four main phases: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Abstract Experimentation. Cheung and Delavega's (2014) Five-Way Experiential Learning Model discusses the addition of a fifth element: Formative Integration, which accounts for the importance of seeing an entire process to then replicate it in the future. The findings from this study confirm the importance of the Concrete Experience phase, during which students need to have opportunities to see skills they will need in their future practice by engaging in hands-on field practicum experiences and seeing clinicians at work in real-time. Additionally, the findings from this study support the necessity of reflection as an essential component of experiential learning, with either a coworker or supervisor, so that students have the opportunity to think through what they have seen and experienced, determine how it fits into their previous knowledge, and how they might use the new knowledge in the future. Lastly, the findings of my study also support Cheung and Delavaga's (2014) suggestion of an additional step in the cycle, Formative Integration, where students need to see the entirety of a process so they can understand how to implement those skills in their own practice, as explained previously in participants' explicit desire to observe

complete processes from begin to end. This element allows students to feel confident in translating their newly acquired skills into the workplace after graduation.

While evidence from this study supports experiential learning theory, it also expands on what is known about the ways in which communities of practice might function to prepare students to enter the social work field and how learning takes place within the community itself. The communities of practice framework suggests that groups of coworkers organically create the communities (Wenger, 1998), and that people who might join the community must pass through layers or levels of acceptance before being fully accepted. Findings from this study confirm the importance of communities of practice as a keystone of experiential learning experiences, not just an additional opportunity, for the practicum students. In many cases, participants cited it as the most important aspect of their learning during the practicum.

Interacting with coworkers and being brought from the periphery, as an outsider, closer to the middle where employed clinicians practice as a member of the community of practice allowed for students to observe problem-solving, hear discourse between professionals, and ask questions or think through ideas related to practice in the field. As mentioned previously, this space is often an important part of socialization to norms of the workplace and to the social work field in general (Miller, 2013; Stempfli et al., 2016). This idea could be expanded into a framework that better represents this approach to experiential learning as direct, hands-on experience that is reinforced and enhanced when that learning comes from within a community of practice and from coworkers.

Beyond supporting, confirming, and expanding on the literature related to experiential learning theory and communities of practice theory in social work, this study adds to the rare literature in the field related to the incorporation of critical feminist theory in social work

academia and practice. The lens of critical feminism is a relatively new concept within the social work literature and is sparsely represented. As mentioned extensively in Chapter Two and earlier in this chapter, some social work researchers and authors seem to be using a critical feminist perspective, but not calling it such (Eyal-Lubing & Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Saulnier, 2000; Turner & Maschi, 2015). It will be important in the field moving forward to standardize the name that is used for this perspective, so that it can become more commonly recognized and understood within the field and the literature.

The findings in this study confirm that critical feminist theory is under-utilized within social work academia as a framework to understand it, despite the overwhelming number of women who enter the social work field. The majority of participants failed to notice gender discrepancies in their field placement agencies or within their schools of social work, and some commented that they were not trained to think about things that way. Krumer-Nevo and Komem (2015) discuss that, because of the emphasis within the social work field on differentiation and focusing on clients' individual strengths, needs, and challenges, it was difficult for social workers to align an incorporation of environment, historical, and imbedded inequalities that exist within the clients' life systems. Despite this difficulty, the incorporation of a critical feminist understanding of a client's situation is important to gain a holistic understanding of existing challenges that even the clients themselves may not recognize (Dominelli & MacLeod, 1989; Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015), which is needed to understand the institutionalized and ingrained barriers that exist for many client populations. Thus, it would be beneficial to the field for critical feminist theory to continue to be explored as a theoretical underpinning for understanding social work curricula, research, and current practices.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that, even in fields that are considered to be female-dominant, like social work, the gender discrepancies and concerns related to inequality still exist (Holosko, et al., 2016; McPhail, 2004; Pease, 2011). In fact, when viewed through a critical feminist lens, labeling specific fields in society as female-dominant could be interpreted as a way to embed the idea that women have power in those fields, when, in reality, they do not. This misconception must continue to be laid bare so that female social workers and social work students do not continually fall prey to the idea that the social work field supports empowering women, just because, on the surface, it seems to be dominated by females.

It is important to note that, although bringing a critical feminist perspective to the surface in the social work field may bring more understanding of the issues that currently exist, that does not automatically mean that those issues are rectified. This study expands on what we know about critical feminism by using it as a framework for understanding in the social work field. Critical feminist theory is not often utilized to look for a solution; but rather, it can be used for educating, providing understanding, and problematizing what is considered “normal” in society. This study searches for its application in the field when social workers are working with clients, and includes advocating for equal promotion and equal pay.

Limitations of this Study

As mentioned in Chapter One, this study has limitations that should be considered when weighing its interpretations and importance. The sample size consisted of only 10 participants. More participants could have volunteered to participate, which would have allowed for the incorporation of a more diverse set of ideas and experiences. Additionally, a limitation of this study’s findings could be a function of the volunteers who chose to respond to the call for

participants. It is possible that their motivations for responding were to share specific feedback, positive or negative.

Two more limitations to this study is that all participants were women and the majority identified as White, which is not representative of the demographics of all social work students nor of all social work practitioners. The perspectives of other genders and races would have recognized more of the diverse voices from the social work field and, likely, present a broader perspective from which to draw inferences. Additionally, participants in this study were only representative of two universities, although one was public and one was private. They were all located within one rural geographic location in the U.S in the state of Pennsylvania. Ideally, participants from a variety of schools and more geographic locations could be represented, again to vary the voices and perspectives present in the data.

Additionally, this study could have been exponentially more in-depth had I taken a narrative approach. Due to the lack of literature in some of these areas, I wanted to get a better idea of status of recently-graduated clinicians currently working in the field, but now it is apparent that there is so much more insight that can be gleaned from all of them. Ideally, a quantitative component could also have been included to make some findings more easily generalizable.

Lastly, as a current social work clinician working in the field that graduated from an undergraduate social work program, my interpretations could be skewed by my own experiences. Despite all attempts to maintain authenticity of participants' meaning, there is never a situation in which all bias can be eliminated. The understanding and representation of the findings of this study come from my own understanding as well.

Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the lack of representation in this study of participants who did not identify as female and White, further research should explore a wider range of participant demographics. Considering the recommendation for the social work field to incorporate critical feminist theory, it will be valuable to hear the voices of other genders from within the field. Additionally, diverse perspectives, including those related to race, religion, sexual orientation, and class, could be considered, as they were not included within the scope of this study. It would be useful to explore those demographic differences from a critical feminist perspective in the social work field in an in-depth manner, possibly focusing on one major topic at a time or the intersectionality of two or more of them. Critical feminist theory might also be used as a lens to examine how the gender disparities affect learning, in both quality and quantity. Additionally, a critical feminist theoretical framework could be incorporated into social work research for better understanding of phenomena in the social work field and education. Due to the apparent lack of understanding of critical feminist theory by social work practitioners in the existing research (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015), further research into its effectiveness as an educational approach would help advance the understanding of the theory.

As mentioned above, there is a need for the communities of practice framework to be studied more extensively within social work research and utilized as a theoretical framework to better understand the learning that takes place during the social work field placement. Lastly, due to the continuing trend of increasing nontraditional student enrollment in higher education, schools of social work would benefit from investing in better understanding the needs of these students and how they can better cater to their learning needs. CSWE would also benefit if they did the same, because students may recognize the effort and be attracted to a field that appreciates the knowledge and experience they bring with them. Likewise, adult education and

adult learning theories may assist the schools and CSWE to more fully understand their student's experiences during the field practicum. Instead of a stark separation between the adult education field and social science fields, such as social work, the inclusion of adult learning theories in social work curricula would be beneficial to traditional and nontraditional students alike.

Final Reflections

Having had the fortune of being an undergraduate social work student who had a wonderful field practicum experience with an attentive supervisor, opportunity for autonomy, and a high degree of encouragement and support, it is important to me that other social work students receive the same type of high quality education that I did. On the other hand, the experiences I had as a master's level social work student encountering barriers related to my gender that other students may experience as a bachelor's or master's level student, it became even more important to me to be invested in social work student education. The story I shared in the beginning of this dissertation is only one of millions of student interactions with marginalization due to their gender in the field, where I was given less opportunity for practice than my male student counterpart. At the time, due to my lack of interaction with critical theory as a whole and critical feminist theory specifically, I was not able to fully understand or recognize what I was experiencing.

Looking back now, I know that my gender was impacting my experience and it has become very important to me to ensure that students are aware of these potential issues, can recognize them when they occur, and can give feedback to the appropriate person in an attempt to combat them. Additionally, when I became a more experienced working practitioner, I took on the role of supervisor to as many students as possible in an effort to give back to the field and to invest in students.

Throughout the course of my doctoral studies, critical theory, and now critical feminist theory, provided an academic understanding of the challenges that I had seen in my field and had experienced personally. Having a better understanding historically and systemically of how injustices have pervaded our society has made it impossible not to recognize the negative effects it continues to have on many areas, including the social work field. I knew that it was an integral part to the experience and it was an important addition to my understanding of this study for that reason.

As mentioned earlier, I had to be intentional and reflective throughout the process to ensure that my own experiences, concerns, and questions were not influencing or changing the meaning of my participants to the best of my ability. Once injustice is recognized, it can be difficult to completely remove yourself in an attempt to maintain understanding from another person's point of view who may not have that recognition yet. Consulting with my advisor, committee, and the participants themselves throughout the writing process solidified to the highest degree possible that I was reflecting their meanings appropriately, and thus confirming suspected and reported issues that exist within the field of social work.

Unfortunately, that confirmation does not feel like a victory. Instead, it is a constant reminder of how far the social work field, and the world, in general, has to go in the continued quest for gender equality. However, I was struck by the small rays of hope that shone through in many of the responses. Whether it was an exceptionally influential supervisor, opportunities to work autonomously, or professors who changed students' viewpoints and opened their eyes to potential, there is still much light within social work academia and within the field as a whole. Although there were always areas where programs or agencies could improve, there were also

things that some of them were doing well. This provided some relief and encouragement that if tweaks and changes are made, many needs could be met for many students.

On a more macro level, though, the challenge of the gender disparity within the field seems overwhelming when you pour it all out into one document, as I have done here. I found myself almost happy that many of the participants did not realize the depth of inequality that exists, because the weight of it can make it feel insurmountable at times, and I do not want any of them to be discouraged from continuing their journey. The first step may be to just acknowledge that we have a problem in the first place and work to educate these strong, intelligent women on how to advocate for themselves from within the social work field. As I have come to know many of them well over the course of this study, I know that all of the tools already exist to make positive changes within this field; the spark just needs to be ignited. I hope that this contribution is part of a larger movement that acts as the match that lights the fire.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDES

The following was a preliminary interview guide used at each interview, though additional follow-up questions were also asked:

Interview One

1. Tell me about your field practicum experience.
2. Tell me about the role of your field instructor during your field practicum.
3. Tell me about the role of coworkers or students in your learning experience.
4. What experiences worked well for your learning?
5. What influenced you the most during your field practicum?
6. Did you feel prepared before you joined the workforce? Why/why not?
7. When you graduated and joined the workforce, did your perspective on the effectiveness of your field placement change? Why/why not?
8. What do you wish you had experienced that would have enhanced your learning?

Interview Two

1. Tell me about any experiences during your field practicum that you feel were affected by your gender.
2. Did you take any coursework during your BSW program that focused on gender and/or marginalization related to gender?
3. Did you experience or observe any marginalization/discrimination due to gender during your field practicum? If so, please explain and tell me about your reaction to that situation.

4. Did you provide any feedback to your field instructor, other agency employee, or instructors at school regarding gender and non-gender related issues during your field practicum? If so, please explain and tell me how that feedback was received.
5. How do you perceive female leadership opportunities within your field practicum agency?
6. How do you perceive female leadership opportunities at your current job and within the field as a whole?
7. What else do you feel is important to be shared regarding your field practicum experience?

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