The Lived Experience of Professional Identity: A Year-Long Study with Newly Qualified Social Workers

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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Division of Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

Signature:
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Ethics Approval

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The CSU School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee approved this study in 2012. If you have any complaints or concerns about this research please, contact the Faculty of Arts and Education Human Research Ethics Committee through:

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Abstract

This thesis explores how professional identity is experienced by newly qualified social workers during their first 12 months post-qualification. Professional identity is explored through the theories of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work, which together capture the individual and social dimensions of lived experience. Participants’ stories provide valuable insight into professional identity with implications for social work students, graduates, educators, employers and the wider profession.

Two research questions were explored:

How is professional social work identity experienced during the first 12 months post-qualification?

How are the professional identities of newly qualified social workers fostered and/or eroded during this period of their first 12 months post-qualification?

Seventeen participants self-selected to be involved in the study, most of whom were from rural and regional locations and all of whom completed their undergraduate social work degree with Charles Sturt University (CSU) in 2012. Three semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with each participant over a 12-month period to gather rich descriptions of lived experience for interpretive analysis. The interviews were accompanied by a follow-up focus group to affirm the themes.

The findings indicated that the first year was an important time for change and growth as the participants transitioned and adjusted to their professional identity. Participants articulated how their professional identity was fostered and/or eroded by both individual and social contexts. Most participants described the development of their professional identity in positive terms, but there were also risks, especially in the face of organisational demands, workplace bullying and discourses that did not value a social work identity. The participants’ stories describe the passions and strengths they brought to their organisation and profession as well as their changing needs for long-term formal and informal support over the year.
The study’s findings indicate a need for greater attention to professional identity in social work during the initial post-qualification period in Australia through further research and dialogue. The study’s conclusions identify strategies for multilevel systemic support for newly qualified practitioners during this key period of development in order to consolidate and sustain their foundation as committed social workers.

*Keywords* – professional identity, newly qualified social workers, hermeneutic phenomenology, critical social work.
**Terminology and Abbreviations**

**AASW** – Australian Association of Social Work. This is the professional association for social workers in Australia. It is also responsible for accrediting entry-level social work degrees. Membership of the association is voluntary.

**BASW** – British Association of Social Work.

**BSW** – Bachelor of Social Work. A four-year accredited undergraduate degree in Australian social work. Successful completion provides eligibility for membership of the AASW.

**Being** – refers to Heidegger’s philosophical concept of being, which is focused on people's lived experience and perceptions of existence (van Manen 1997). Being is informed by how one constructs and makes meaning of their existence in the world, especially through interactions with others, including objects (Conroy, 2003; Heidegger, 1962).

**CSU** – Charles Sturt University. A regional multi-campus Australian higher education institution. Major campuses are located in rural and regional New South Wales, including Wagga Wagga, Bathurst, Thurgoona (Albury), Port Macquarie, Dubbo and Orange.

**Discourse** – contextual theories that express ideas and language about social phenomena, especially ways of intervening in people’s lives (Healy, 2014).

**IASSW** – International Association of Schools of Social Work.

**IFSW** – International Federation of Social Workers.

**Lived experience** – aspect and/or activity a person directly experiences (Schutz, 1975). According to van Manen (2014), lived experience can unfold through the existential themes of body (corporeality), time (temporality), objects (materiality), space (spatiality) and relationships (relationality).

**Micro, meso and macro** – individual and social systems that interact and influence lived experience (Healy, 2014). The micro layer involves the individual; the meso layer represents relationships, groups and organisations; and the macro layer includes
wider communities, societal institutions, culture and structures (Cummins, Sevel, & Pedrick, 2012).

**Newly qualified social worker** – The first 12 months post-qualification period for a social worker. This period begins after graduating from an accredited social work course, and ends 12 months later.

**NGO** – Non-government organisation.

**NVIVO** – A software program designed for qualitative researchers to assist with storing, organising and analysing materials for a research project.

**Ontology** – branch of philosophy concerned with understanding the nature and form of reality. This is commonly expressed through two frameworks within research—constructionism and objectivism (Sarantakos, 2005). Hermeneutic phenomenology draws mostly upon social constructionist ideas aimed at finding meaning of existence (Heidegger, 1962).

**Phenomenon** – any activity or event that is directly experienced and meaning is attached to (van Manen, 1997).

**Professional identity** – personal and professional aspects of self, based on the shared dimensions of being (ontology/axiology beliefs and values), knowing/thinking (knowledge-theory) and doing (method-skill). Professional identity is socially constructed as an individual and social activity that is constantly renegotiated through time, space, materials, relationships, and through bodily experiences.

**Role-identity** – the constructions of self that emerge through the job title and description (role) of one’s employment.

**TAFE** – Technical and Further Education.
Chapter 1
Introduction

Background to the Study

Is it important to develop and sustain professional social work identity in current employment settings? This question is central to the background of my study, which explores how newly qualified social workers experience and foster a professional identity, during their first 12 months post-qualification. I am particularly interested in how individual and wider social systems may influence experiences of professional identity. To understand this, my study uses a theoretical framework based on hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory to gather rich descriptions of lived experience, through critically reflective processes. The theoretical framework subscribes to a subjective worldview, which embraces me as a situated researcher. In keeping with this framework, I will be using a first-person narrative throughout the thesis.

At its core, a professional identity incorporates values, beliefs, knowledge and skills that are maintained by an occupational group (Beddoe, 2013). The presence of a professional identity can unfold within diverse arrangements and contexts. For example, traditional male-dominated professions, such as medicine and law, have held distinct roles that are regulated and protected, in order to minimise risk and ensure high-quality services are provided to communities (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). These professions have been in a position to maintain a professional identity based on distinct attributes and exercising control over job roles, education and membership into the group (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). Unregulated or emerging professions have not exercised the same level of control but can still develop a professional identity based on knowledge, skills, motivations and roles that define who they are (Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

In social work there are international, national and local dimensions that contribute towards the development of a professional identity, including definitions, codes of ethics, practice standards, professional associations and accredited education programs. At an international level, the most recent definition of social work was developed and adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2014.
It states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014).

This definition emphasises drawing from diverse disciplines and knowledges to uphold the importance of relationships and multidimensional practice.

International definitions of social work are commonly accepted within many countries across the world (Staniforth, Fouché, & O’Brien, 2011). These are generally enshrined in national codes of ethics, for example, Australia and Britain (Australian Association of Social Work [AASW], 2010; British Association of Social Work [BASW], 2012). However, the ongoing dominance of Western perspectives in contemporary social work and past definitions has been questioned (Gray, 2005; Gray & Fook, 2004; Haug, 2005; Hugman, Moosa-Mitha, & Moyo, 2010). It is argued that greater consideration needs to be given to multiple cultural contexts (Alphonse, George, & Moffatt, 2008) and how professional identity can be developed in a globalised world (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016). This reflects the ongoing debates about how to construct and maintain a professional identity which balances diverse practices.

Moving to the national context in Australia, the AASW maintains Practice Standards (2013) that set professional benchmarks for social workers. These standards are informed by the current Code of Ethics that outlines a commitment to enhancing wellbeing through three core values: respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity (AASW, 2010). A professional social work identity is based on improving relationships, achieving environmental sustainability and facilitating fair access to opportunities (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). To do this, social workers intervene within private and public settings, including individual (micro), group (meso) and wider community (macro) levels of practice (Banks, 2012; Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2012). Common intervention roles include, among others, counselling, case management, group work and community development (Chenoweth
& McAuliffe, 2015). Therefore, social work strives to improve social wellbeing and quality of life by realising human rights and social justice.

This national context of values and ethics filters down to the local one, especially within social work education programs. Australian educators have a responsibility to socialise students into the profession, especially through extensive field placement requirements, to ensure they emerge from study with a professional identity which embraces social work values (AASW, 2012). In my study, all of the participants graduated from one university, and so it is important to give some background and context to the institution and programs, which aim to see graduates emerge with a coherent professional identity. Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a multi-campus institution spread across rural and regional New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The Bachelor of Social Work was the first accredited distance (off-campus) program in Australia, which began in 1991, and has always drawn enrolments from rural, regional and urban areas. The educators were tasked with addressing a lack of social workers in rural and regional NSW (Bowles et al., 2015). In light of this, the CSU social work programs have always aimed to provide rural and regional communities with social work graduates, and to facilitate diverse access to education through blended learning opportunities, especially for students who cannot readily undertake full-time, on-campus study in urban locations (Bowles et al., 2015), where the majority of Australian programs are delivered. A recent report acknowledged CSU social work as the program from which the majority of practitioners across rural and regional Western NSW received their qualification (Western Research Institute, 2010).

Based on these goals, social work educators at CSU, including myself, maintain a vision and mission that is informed by the national and international contexts of social work (Bowles et al., 2015, p.15):

**Vision:** Informed action for social justice and human rights

**Mission:** The Charles Sturt University Human Services group will lead the human services sector in advancing social justice, human rights and thriving communities regionally, nationally and internationally through education, research, ethical practice and partnerships.

These commitments are particularly important as CSU social work delivers programs online and face to face through full-time and part-time study options. Consequently,
the student profile has increasingly expanded and diversified over time to encourage access and equity for students from various backgrounds and locations, including urban areas where they may not be able to readily access on-campus and full-time study (Bowles et al., 2015). Such diversity is reflected in the participants who self-selected to be in my study, as they came from a range of ages, backgrounds and locations, especially rural and regional settings.

The international, national and local structures indicate that social work is dedicated to developing and maintaining professional identity based on core values of social justice and human rights, as well as ethics, knowledge and skills (Beddoe, 2013). What does this commitment to professional identity mean in contemporary workplaces? This is an important question to consider because the meaning and practices of professions and professional identities have become highly contested for some occupations (Baxter, 2011). In recent decades, theoretical developments and consumer choice movements have criticised and questioned the use of language and power that all professions and occupations have operated within, including human service professions such as social work (Fook, 2016). Many of these challenges have come from dominant discourses, which Healy (2014) defined as contextual theories that express ideas and language about social phenomena, especially ways of intervening in people’s lives. These discourses have challenged notions of professional integrity, independence and expertise, especially how power has been wielded by professional and occupational groups. For example, a neo-conservative discourse maintains that individuals cause their own problems and inequality is a natural outcome of market forces. Furthermore, organisations should operate along the same principles of a private business in order to maximise efficiency and individual choice (Newberry, 2014). These views also reflect a managerial discourse, which emphasises administrative and technical work (Aronson & Smith, 2011). Based on this, interventions should be focused on improving and monitoring the capabilities of individuals to fix their own problems.

Such discourses have been heavily criticised for impacting the nature of organisations and the type of interventions social workers undertake in the field. At the organisational level, extensive research across countries shows that practitioners, including those who are newly qualified, are challenged by tightened physical and psycho-emotional resources (Baines, 2006; Cherniss, 1995); top-down bureaucratic management that limits professional autonomy (Harré Hindmarsh, 1992; Ife, 1997);
and stress and burnout that impacts retention of social workers to their jobs and profession (Cherniss, 1995; Coffey, Dugdill & Tattersall, 2004; van Heugten, 2011). These challenges impact access to professional development (Seden, 2011), the capacity to work with service participants (Asquith, Clark, & Waterhouse, 2005) and social workers ability to achieve job satisfaction (Curtis, Moriarty, & Netten, 2010; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). Many of these trends occur within a climate where management of risk and defensive practice takes priority (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016) over reflective practice. In Australia, these issues can be heightened in rural and regional contexts, as practitioners usually have little access to resources (Chenoweth & McAuliff, 2015). Rural social workers tend to juggle multiple roles, which can facilitate more creativity and autonomy, but it can also be isolating and challenging as there is often little support available or opportunities to undertake professional development activities (Chenoweth & McAuliff, 2015; Green, 2003; Krieg Mayer, 2001).

At the professional level, these discourses have sought to erode professional boundaries in many groups in the human services sector, especially those that are unregulated, such as social work in Australia. These discourses privilege generic competencies and roles (Newberry, 2014), which place less emphasis on the notion of a professional identity (Gregory & Holloway, 2005). Healy (2009) described concern that these trends undermine professional loyalties and send conflicting messages about professional identity to newly qualified practitioners. Rather than being encouraged to have a social work identity, organisational identities, tied to generic job titles and narrow role descriptions are privileged. Social workers are expected to be generic technicians who manage risk with fewer resources, including access to professional development and supervision (Newberry, 2014). Such an emphasis undermines a social work identity based on professional standards of lifelong learning, autonomy and reflective practice. Indeed, it is increasingly common for people to experience and embrace multiple identities across organisational, personal and educational contexts, and this can mean a professional identity may not be a priority for qualified practitioners (Harrison & Healy, 2015).

These dominant discourses are also criticised for losing sight of the social context, which can impact on people’s lives (Houston, 2016), and conflict with a social work commitment to social justice and human rights. There are fears that social work
identities, based on these values, are becoming narrower or simply lost within the wider socio-political landscape:

…there are clearly a number of serious issues confronting the profession of social work which are not simply to do with shortage of numbers and resource distribution. Rather, the “crisis” has more to do with loss of professional identity, which impacts on recruitment, retention, and service provision. (Asquith et al., 2005, p.39)

Such a narrowing of professional identity can have particular impacts on newly qualified social workers. Newberry (2014) argued neo-conservative discourses frame expectations of graduates to emerge from study as competent technicians, who can enter a workplace with little support, resources and opportunities to develop; they must “hit the ground running” (p.43). These issues could be heightened, as newly qualified social workers across a range of countries, including the United Kingdom and Australia, face various challenges when they transition from study to practice, such as establishing and developing a reputation (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000); building confidence (Donnellan & Jack, 2015); developing professional identity (Cameron, 2003; Fook et al., 2000); and consolidating knowledge and skill (Agllias, 2010). In terms of job seeking, newly qualified social workers achieve good levels of employment (89 per cent) compared to other Australian graduates (Healy & Lonne, 2010). However, graduates increasingly compete for broader-based welfare jobs and against less qualified workers (Hawkins, Ryan, Murray, Grace, Hawkins, Hess, Mendes & Chatley, 2000), some of which is in response to workforce needs as the sector continues to rapidly expand (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Greater emphasis is also placed on part-time and casual employment (Harvey & Kennedy, 2000), and direct practice (individual-focused) positions (Hawkins et al., 2000). In Australia, there are calls to further explore how newly qualified social workers are best prepared for entering practice and developing in the long term (Cheron-Sauer, 2012), especially as resources are increasingly removed from organisations, which undermines the capacity for field placement to prepare future graduates (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Cleak, Anand & Das, 2016a), as well as ongoing support for newly qualified social workers once they are employed. Very little is known about what happens to their professional identities, especially in the non-government sector, where many generic roles have arisen (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Healy, Harrison & Foster, 2015).
These trends have raised challenges for developing and sustaining professional social work identity. Various stakeholders have continually questioned the nature and scope of social work, and whether it is a “profession” (Asquith et al., 2005; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Weiss-gal & Welbourne, 2008) that can maintain a coherent professional identity (Gibelman, 1999). Unlike in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), statutory regulation and protection of title has not occurred for Australian social workers. Instead the profession is self-regulated and education programs must be accredited by the AASW. Nonetheless, in Australia and across many countries, social work has increasingly worked towards becoming recognised as a profession, especially through government regulation, maintaining distinctly titled qualifications, accredited training, professional bodies, and codes of ethics (Weiss-gal & Welbourne, 2008). For example, this includes Australian Practice Standards (AASW, 2013) and Supervision Standards, where it is recommended that new graduates receive fortnightly supervision (AASW, 2014). Social work has also established international bodies which represent the interests of the profession. From this, social work has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to professional identity, which is in contrast to the trend towards generic employment positions identified above. Social work does not only define itself in terms of generic roles and competencies; the profession operates in a wider ethical and value-driven framework (Bowles, Collingridge, Curry, & Valentine, 2006), based on human rights and social justice. Such a framework means that a social worker does not have to be defined only by a job title, role description or organisation. They can choose to embrace wider professional commitments that may transcend organisational contexts. Claiming a professional identity can be a point of resistance against dominant discourses which seek to erode professional boundaries. Despite this, social workers, including those who are newly qualified, must navigate discourses that permeate organisations and job roles they undertake. There are gaps in the profession and knowledge base, as “little is known about how social welfare professionals are affected by the well-established and extensive debates about professional identity” (Healy, 2009, pp.405–406). While social work appears dedicated to professional identity through professional associations and codes of ethics, little is known about what happens to it when graduates enter the field and face transition challenges and dominant discourses. Given the broader contexts that frame social work and workplaces, it is important to explore how newly qualified social workers experience their professional identity and maintain a commitment to the profession and its ethos.
To thrive in contemporary workplaces, social workers are encouraged within the profession to embrace their professional identity in order to enact core values (Asquith et al., 2005; Shim, Hwang, & Lee, 2009; Valentich, 2011), and to find collaborative ways to be leaders in order to maintain and develop professional recognition, retention and ultimately a professional identity (Healy & Meagher, 2004). With this in mind, I embrace the term “professional identity” for the purposes of my research to reflect the necessity for social work to continue to define itself, and to claim professional recognition and space, as part of sustaining the profession. This study explores how newly qualified social workers experience and foster their identities as they face individual, organisational and socio-cultural realities during their first year after graduation. Professional identity is seen as an important part of maintaining social work, and yet little is known about how it is experienced. It is difficult for educators, employers, supervisors and the wider profession to nurture and sustain a professional identity when it is so unknown. My study is an opportunity to enhance understanding of social work identity as part of sustaining the profession.
What Is Professional Identity?

Identity. The term, “identity” is theorised across many disciplines through questions such as “Where does my sense of self come from? Was it made for me, or did it arise spontaneously” (Mansfield, 2000, p.1)? It is considered an individualised and collective phenomenon. Identity is based on the idea of “self”, and is said to involve a sense of awareness and reflexivity to conceptualise and understand ourselves (Giddens, 1991). The “self” includes aspects of personality and belief and value systems that are both personal and social, and can comprise professional dimensions (Dewane, 2006; Harrison & Ruch, 2007). Cameron and McDermott (2007) emphasise this as a bodily experience as people are made of their emotions, memories and temperament. Incorporating this with a phenomenological perspective, van Manen (1997, 2014) outlines how one’s existence and identity is constructed through their body (corporeality), relationships (relationality), the physical world (materiality), and across time (temporality) and space (spatiality). Scholar (2016) supports this in social work by exploring how objects and artefacts (lived materiality) can carry important meanings, which can reflect professional identity. As such, a sense of self does not exist in a vacuum but through these existential and social components.

In psychology, Erikson has been influential in conceptualising identity as an internal process of formation and achievement, particularly during a person’s adolescent years. This is referred to as identity work (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009), where thoughts, feelings and behaviours develop a personal identity and allow a person to grow. For Erikson, an identity is based on developing an ideology and values to create a sense of who the person is as an individual (Weiten, 2014). This raises the notion of self-concept, where the views, values and ideas of who an individual is are developed and projected (Tamm, 2010). To do this, one can draw from social categories such as gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity and nationality, spirituality and professional identity among others (Berk, 2012; Freud, 2001). These categories are referred to as social identities as people derive their sense of self from membership of various groups (Tamm, 2010). If a person is unable to consolidate their identity, Erikson argues, that person will experience an identity crisis that will have long-term psychological impacts (Weiten, 2014).
The notion that identity is linear and formed largely within adolescence is contested. Within sociological and critical perspectives, identity is theorised as fluid, contradictory and re-negotiated over time (Fook, 2016; Habermas, 1987; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000). Butler (1990) captures this by arguing identity, especially gender, is constantly performed through everyday actions and is thus ever changing. Mansfield (2000) argues the socially constructed and political nature of self dominates many current theorists. A social construction perspective emphasises that identity is based on two interconnected aspects: an internal (personal) subjective sense of self, and an external (social) sense of self based on attributes and influences developed through relationships with other people (Frost, 2008; Payne, 2006). Social work embraces this idea through the person-in-environment perspective, where the aim is to understand how people’s lives are experienced and influenced by micro, meso and macro social contexts (Houston, 2016). As such, identity is formulated within and across various spaces.

The socially constructed nature of identity is also reinforced in organisational studies: “… [identity includes] the attributes, characteristics, and narratives that are claimed by or attributed to an entity, helping to define what the entity is and what it is not” (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2009, p.4). Here, identity is also changeable through storytelling/narratives as one constructs a sense of “self” through defining who they are and who they are not. This highlights the importance of exercising agency, where a person can construct and re-construct an identity over time.

Using these ideas, questions of identity include: who am I (Aymer, 2002); how do I define myself; how do I define myself with reference to others; and how do others define me. These questions incorporate ontological and epistemological dimensions as people construct and express how they view themselves and the world, individually and socially. Freud (2001) refines these into two questions: “how do I define myself, and how am I defined by others” (p.4). The double question refers to identity being understood on the one hand as self-constructed, and on the other hand as shaped through the attributions of others. These views and questions reinforce that identity is fundamentally about a sense of self, ideology, values and social context that offer a way forward in life.

Feminist and critical perspectives have also criticised aspects of Western definitions of identity for placing too much emphasis on traditional social categories, such as
gender and class. It is argued that perpetuating hierarchical binaries and fixed notions of people within these categories reinforces disempowered identities (Fook, 2016; Freud, 2001; Ploesser & Mecheril, 2012). For example, Irigaray, challenged notions of gender in psychoanalysis by arguing that perspectives of women were regularly neglected because they were defined in relation to masculinity (Mansfield, 2000). These fixed notions diminish personal agency in construction of identity and deny diverse lived experience (Fook, 2016; Frost, 2008). In extreme cases, Freud (2001) highlights the risk of these categories being used for socially divisive purposes and to justify discrimination and even genocide. She looked to a future where identity can be freely constructed and re-constructed (Freud, 2001). Therefore, identity is defined as a continual process of establishing diverse constructions and expressions of “self” based on values, beliefs and social relationships. Constructions of self are individually and collectively built through relationships with others, objects, people’s bodies, time and space.

**Professional identity.** How is a professional identity conceptualised within this landscape? Habermas (1987) emphasises the discursive nature of identity, of language being the vehicle to define ourselves in relationship to others. The relational and discursive aspect is maintained in social identity theory, where individuals take on the values, knowledge, skills and norms of their respective professions (Nyström, 2009) and engage in a process of comparing and contrasting themselves with other groups to define who they are (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Clark, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Zikic & Richardson, 2016). The attributes approach, emphasised core traits a professional group distinctly attains for itself, in terms of knowledge, roles and autonomy (Macdonald, 1995; Weiss-gal & Welbourne, 2008). One can gather from this perspective that a professional identity is based on a sense of distinctiveness and exercising some control over who is a member of the profession. However, Zikic and Richardson (2016) point out that professional identity can exist despite a lack of regulation or control in some groups. At its centre, professional identity involves a person constructing boundaries around who they are and who they are not, based on shared dimensions of beliefs, values, ethics, knowledge and skills (Nyström, 2009; Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

Tamm (2010) describes professional identity as a sub-identity, where people take on socially sanctioned positions and view themselves in a particular way within their professional and workplace roles. A professional identity is then tied to the
occupational group that the person belongs to and a role identity is attached to them from within their employment setting (Caza & Wilson, 2009). Rothbard and Ramajarn (2009) discuss the notion of multiple and interconnected identities that unfold in and across a person’s role, workplace and personal life, among others. A professional identity is part of a multilayered experience (Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016) but its relevance can vary from person to person (Harrison & Healy, 2015). Based on this view, to conceptualise professional identity as a sub-identity would be limited. It neglects the fluid, embodied and interconnected nature of multiple identities, where various aspects of self can emerge at different times (Rothbard & Ramajarn, 2009). In social work this is acknowledged as “use of self”, where personal and professional dimensions of “self” come together and overlap. Dewane (2006) highlights that “Melding the professional self of what one knows (training, knowledge, techniques) with the personal self of who one is (personality traits, belief systems, and life experience), is a hallmark of skilled practice” (p.544). In her view, personal and professional “selves” exist in relationship with each other, as opposed to the latter being a sub-identity. Social work is believed to be distinguishable through the conscious and entwined use of self (Dewane, 2006) as part of being reflexive (Miehls & Moffatt, 2000). Social work embraces the view of professional identity as being based on a set of values and beliefs, knowledge and skill that forms part of the membership of the professional group (Beddoe, 2013), as well as articulating social workers in relationship to other professions and occupational groups (Payne, 2006). This is where a collective identity can be formed and experienced among like-minded professionals and through distinguishing who social workers are from others.

Professional identity can also be defined in relation to the shared dimensions of being, knowing/thinking and doing. The current Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards refer to these dimensions as a series of attributes to be fostered within students: “These attributes are informed by core values, including social justice, human rights, human dignity and equity – ‘attributes of being’…education enables ‘thinking in order to know what to do’ and ‘being, which drives why we do it’” (AASW, 2012, p.4). Aymer (2002) uses the concepts of ontology, epistemology and methodology in asking the questions of being, knowing/thinking and doing: “Who am I [being]? What should I know [knowing/thinking]? What should I be able to do [doing]?” (p.18). People are encouraged to reflect on all dimensions as part of critical practice (Aymer & Okitikpi,
Bell (2012) connects these interrelated dimensions as ontology (being), epistemology (knowing) and methodology (doing). Ontology refers to ways of being in the world (Bell, 2012) based on expressing fundamental views of existence. Bell (2012) argues that social work needs to clarify how its practitioners view the world ontologically, so they can be more consciously aligned with their values and beliefs. From this perspective, values, or axiology, become a fundamental part of being (ontology).

Drawing these ideas together, professional identity is defined in this study as the personal and professional aspects of self, based on the shared dimensions of being (ontology/axiology-beliefs and values), knowing/thinking (knowledge-theory) and doing (method-skill). Professional identity is socially constructed as an individual and social activity that is constantly renegotiated through time, space, materials, relationships, and through person’s bodily experiences.

**Impetus for the Study: Researcher Foregrounding**

The seeds for this study were planted during my own first 12 months post-qualification. In this section, I share my story to position myself within the research design and process. In phenomenological terms, this is known as foregrounding, where I am a situated researcher who must uncover how they influence the research design and process. According to van Manen (1997), from the outset, a person holds pre-understandings of a topic and it is important to lay bare ideas, worldviews, theories, and assumptions in order to account and trace influences on the research, especially analysis of lived experience. The aim is not to put aside these aspects of self but to manage them critically (Loftus & Trede, 2009) to ensure the lived experience of participants are the central voices of the study. When done carefully and openly, foregrounding provides an opportunity to transform pre-understandings, as new knowledge is uncovered throughout the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012; van Manen, 1997). As a situated researcher, my ideas, worldviews and prejudices can be positive contributors to research if they are honestly revealed, managed and changed as new knowledge emerges. To achieve this, it is necessary to engage in a foregrounding process whilst developing and undertaking the research.

To explore pre-understandings, Conroy (2003) distinguishes foregrounding and fore-meaning. Foregrounding relates to exploring the researcher’s own historical and current contexts to consider their influences upon the topic. Foregrounding will be
further detailed throughout the thesis when discussing how the study was designed, carried out and written up. Fore-meaning relates to other general pre-understandings that emerge commonly through the undertaking of a literature review. In this thesis, fore-meaning is addressed in chapters 2 and 3 of the literature review. It will be demonstrated how the literature informed my general understanding of newly qualified social workers and influenced the research aims and questions by uncovering gaps in the research.

In terms of my own background and journey, I am a white Australian woman, who was born and raised in the regional city of Wagga Wagga in the state of New South Wales. When I was 18, I moved to Sydney and completed a Certificate IV in Youth Work, at a technical and further education (TAFE) institute. As part of my certificate studies, I undertook a field placement, which led to volunteering at a disability organisation. I returned to Wagga at the end of the year and worked part time in the disabilities sector for almost a year. I began full-time, on-campus undergraduate social work studies in 2005 and finished in 2008. In my third year, I undertook an international exchange for one semester of study at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada.

My final field placement led to employment with the same organisation. The agency was a local religious non-government service, which provided a range of counselling, group and community programs across all age ranges and within local regional and rural communities. My first position was as a school counsellor in the youth services team on a short-term contract. The team was built specifically upon a social work model of theory and practice, which included principles of holistic assessment and intervention. I had the opportunity to work at local primary and secondary schools, with children, young people and their families.

After my short-term contract ended, I moved into the family services team as a permanent part-time generalist counsellor. I worked with people from a diverse age range who were experiencing various issues such as grief and loss; divorce and separation; difficult emotions; parenting; mental health (particularly anxiety and depression); suicide; and trauma. I also did some work in the community education team throughout the year – first as a community educator and then as a parenting development officer, which included engaging with smaller rural communities around Wagga Wagga. My role involved exploring potential educational programs for
children and young people; delivering parenting programs; and community
development activities focused on parenting needs. I had the opportunity to fulfil a
range of roles, and I engaged with various community members, which is common in
regional and rural contexts. In this setting, I also worked with colleagues from a wide
range of discipline backgrounds and qualifications, which included teaching, welfare,
psychology, and counselling.

I experienced the first 12 months post-qualification as both exciting and
overwhelming. I found myself on a roller-coaster; it was a wild ride with many twists
and turns, including emotional highs and lows. Despite having a degree and previous
paid work and life experience, I realised early on that learning had begun all over
again as I stepped into the practice world to engage with clients, largely on my own.
The reality of no longer being under the protective cloak of the “student identity”
during placement was a reminder of the new phase I had entered. Not only was I
seeing myself as a professional, so were clients and colleagues. They were no longer
case studies or observations through the student lens, but real people who had
expectations of me as a qualified professional.

The task of constructing and expressing a social work identity became challenging six
months into my journey. I realised I had to reconcile how my role, and my
organisational and professional identities converged and diverged. These dilemmas
hit me when a social work colleague suggested I compartmentalise identities. I was
told I was a counsellor first and then a social worker. Their comment struck me as
hierarchical and dichotomous, and I questioned whether it was necessary. It raised a
contested relationship between loyalty to my organisation as well as to my profession.
While both were mostly complementary, there were still important differences,
especially with regard to religion. I did not want to see myself tied only to a job
description that meant working mostly with individuals; I wanted to be able to
contribute to the wider organisation and to my profession. However, this raised a
dilemma of identity in relation to how I could merge and express a professional and
organisational allegiance. This situation prompted me to rethink how I constructed
my professional identity. Until that point I had focused mostly on my role description
as a basis for identity. I was not identified or referred to as a social worker and came
to realise that whilst I was drawing from social work, my own professional identity
was not fully clear. In light of this, I asked myself, how is it possible to be one (role)
over the other (profession)? Why is it a question of “either/or”, rather than “both/and”.

These questions came into sharper focus when responding to wider socio-cultural discourses that I could see impacting on organisational structures, communities and service participants with whom I engaged. These included neo-conservativism and the bio-medical discourse. In particular, I remember a local case manager at an employment service asking why I would not diagnose and individually treat a client referred to me when experiencing barriers to gaining employment. No consideration was given to the wider disadvantages this client may be experiencing, and I was characterised as the “top-down” expert who should diagnose and prescribe treatment for the client to follow. Another experience with a psychologist was discussed with one of my supervisors and written up as part of reflective practice (Moorhead & Johnson, 2010). The experience was based on a case conference with a local psychologist who said I should be telling a client what to do; reflective of a medical expert position. The importance of social work-based supervision was highlighted as a central mechanism for facilitating my development of social work values and practice (Moorhead & Johnson, 2010). Through critical reflection I came to recognise dominant discourses more clearly, and how to work with others who practised differently to me. Over time, these experiences prompted me to re-position my social work identity to the forefront of my practice.

The questions I faced about professional identity had repercussions on my practice framework. Over time, my own critical worldview became more visible. Despite developing and asserting a critical awareness, I continued to struggle to bridge the levels of practice in the counselling setting. Fook (2016) relates to this scenario through tracing her professional story and dilemmas when faced with integrating macro-theoretical approaches at the micro level, especially during the early stages of her career, and emphasised the need for a range of methods for practice. For me, when I launched into my first year of practice in a regional area of New South Wales, Australia, I found it was imperative to develop a multidimensional and eclectic practice framework, which emerged by the end of that first year. At the beginning of my post-qualification period, I identified as a problem-solving and task-centred practitioner. By the end of the year, I had developed an eclectic approach based on critical social work and existential philosophies and methods. These changes were more congruent with my ontological and epistemological positioning. Coming to that
realisation took a year of learning, reflection and experimentation to develop self-awareness and a congruent practice framework.

During this time, a range of relationships and structures supported my development as a newly qualified social worker. A foundation of support came from my family, who provided psycho-social support and opportunities to reflect outside my regular professional domain. Both of my parents have been influential in my development as a social worker, as I see each of them embodying qualities of the profession such as a keen commitment to social justice and empathic communication. Their relationship with me, based on these qualities and commitments, was an important part of my first-year journey and my self-care.

Peer support from colleagues was crucial, and we frequently offered each other debriefing and reflection on cases. It was also meaningful to be a member of the AASW. A connection to this professional association reinforced my own sense of social work identity, as I was not just employed as a counsellor or community educator, I belonged to a wider profession with a distinct value and ethical base.

Throughout my first year, I was able to access formal supervision on a regular basis. The organisation maintained two forms of supervision – administrative and clinical. These approaches to my supervision corresponded with trends noted by Beddoe (2011), where components of supervision are increasingly separated from line management. The administrative supervision was undertaken monthly with a team leader and provided time to reflect on orientation, caseload and workplace issues. Its purpose was to contribute to support and development within the organisation. Clinical supervision took place with an external practitioner and mostly focused on reflective learning and development. I chose my own external supervisor, who was paid for by the organisation. There was flexibility about how often clinical supervision could occur, as practitioner needs were taken into account. In my case, I opted for fortnightly supervision for most of the year. Together, these forms of supervision covered core elements identified to be important in social work supervision such as administration, reflection, education and support (AASW, 2014; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014).

Periodic social time with friends from university days was another source of reflection and support. We all practised in different settings, and yet we all experienced similar learning and development challenges. We constantly questioned
ourselves and were keen to ensure we were practising effectively and ethically. Over time I became curious and concerned about our experiences, because some of my friends did not have access to the same supports and opportunities that I did, especially in terms of supervision and professional development. One friend experienced a toxic organisational culture and excessive workload demands. These situations raised concerns about the inconsistent nature of support and development. I began to ask myself, “What is happening to other newly qualified social workers?” How do we, as practitioners, ensure committed social workers transition and remain in the profession?

Finally, I experienced a positive organisational culture where I was recognised and valued as a new graduate who had further learning and development needs. I negotiated workload needs throughout the year with my manager, such as limiting my caseload to allow extra time for critical reflection. In addition to ongoing supervision, I attended a range of professional development activities over a 12-month period, which included solutions-focused practice, narrative therapy, relationships counselling, case management, grief and loss, and parenting programs. The organisation maintained a library of resources for practitioners and subscriptions to journals, which I regularly accessed. Lastly, an independent and fair human resources process assisted with managing a workplace bullying incident. These structures combined to create a largely nurturing environment, where I could learn and develop confidence in my practice.

I spent over 12 months with the agency and undertook individual practice, group work and community development – the three core levels taught during my undergraduate studies. Despite various challenges, I flourished and explored approaches and techniques to construct and express my own professional identity. At the centre of this process was continual praxis, as I reflected on how I constructed reality and how theory informed practice and vice versa. This integration of theory into practice was not a neutral process but guided by a sense of social work identity. The family service team also provided creative space to be exposed to and employ a range of theoretical frameworks across individual, relationship, group, family and community-level work. When I started in the team, I remember my manager emphasising that the individual practitioner has the autonomy to bring their own style and have space to develop it within the context of agency policies and codes of
practice. I was afforded autonomy and creativity to trial a range of theories as part of developing my practice framework and identity over the course of the year.

After leaving the agency, I became a full-time teaching and research academic at Charles Sturt University. In 2011, I began part-time doctoral studies. After exploring a range of topic ideas, I returned to the experiences of newly qualified social workers because my passion remained within this area. Doctoral research has provided an opportunity to thoroughly explore lived experience of social work identity during post-qualification. University studies form part of the process of developing and preparing social work students to enter the profession. It is important to ensure students are transitioning with the tools and sense of being that will provide a foundation for building practice, facing the realities of the workplace and fostering their professional identities. These factors influenced the background and development of my study.

Inevitably, my personal and professional background has influenced the research design and process of my study, including how the participants may see and interact with me. I approached this study with a phenomenological and critical perspective, which was based on an interest in lived experience that is mediated through social relationships and dominant cultures and discourses. While my experiences as a newly qualified social worker have influenced the research process, I have been guided by a phenomenological approach that is based on being curious and open to new ideas in order to transform my pre-understandings. I will discuss this further when outlining the research design and process.

**Thesis Structure**

Chapter 1 introduced central issues to professional identity in social work, which sowed the seeds for my study. Chapter 2 explores those issues in greater detail by covering the first phase of the literature review process. It examines the experiences of newly qualified social workers across a range of countries and employment contexts. Chapter 3 narrows the focus of the literature review to the professional identities of students and newly qualified social workers. This chapter draws out themes and gaps in the knowledge base that informs the theoretical framework, which I detail in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 focuses on the ontological and epistemological dimensions of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work. I will demonstrate how these theories have applied to my study. Once I outline and justify
the theoretical framework, I will describe the methodology and research process in Chapter 5. This chapter outlines the questions and aims of the project based on the theoretical framework and gaps in the literature review.

The next six chapters are dedicated to the findings of this in-depth phenomenological study. Chapter 6 begins the journey of the findings by introducing each participant as an individual as well as the demographics of the whole group. The individual journey will be described first to honour the whole person in the spirit of the theoretical framework. This chapter identifies some underlying themes that are then unpacked in greater detail in the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter 7 examines the journey of transition and adjustment across the first year, which is central to the first research question of the study about the lived experience of professional identity. In this chapter, the ways in which professional identity emerges and changes over the first 12 months are emphasised.

Chapter 8 builds on Chapter 7 by exploring the components of social work identity that change and develop over the first year. These components are detailed through the shared dimensions of being, knowing/thinking and doing, which are central to the definition of professional identity in this study.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 focus on the second research question, about fostering/eroding professional identity within individual/micro (Chapter 9), relational and organisational/meso (Chapter 10), and environmental/macro (Chapter 11) contexts. These chapters will show how professional identity is multilayered and socially situated.

Chapter 12 synthesises the themes from the previous chapters by detailing how the participants experienced the research process itself and includes advice they would give to other key stakeholders. The concluding chapter revisits the research questions, accounts for study limitations, and then identifies specific suggestions to support professional identity during the first-year post-qualification period, as well as pathways for research and dialogue to further develop this project. It will be argued that the ideas provided have important implications for managers/employers, policymakers, social work educators and the wider social work profession.
Chapter 2
Experiences of Newly Qualified Social Workers

As the previous chapter outlined, newly qualified social workers face a range of contemporary challenges in developing and sustaining professional identity. Chapter 2 explores those issues in greater detail by examining literature on the experiences of newly qualified social workers and the major themes the literature review covers. The review forms part of fore-meaning, where I uncover the general pre-understandings I have developed on the topic. By critiquing the literature, I will later articulate how the theoretical framework, and the research aims and questions emerged for the study. In this chapter, the review process will first be detailed, then the major themes of the literature, which are transition and development; preparedness for practice; induction and graduate programs; and job satisfaction and retention. The chapter concludes by highlighting themes and gaps in the research, which prompted a return to the literature to uncover how professional identity is researched with newly qualified social workers.

The Literature Review Process

The narrative literature review was an iterative process that occurred across three main phases of the whole study. When first developing my topic, I broadly looked at the experiences of newly qualified social workers to examine the terrain of the research. I gathered literature by searching databases including EBSCOhost, the CSU Primo search engine and Google Scholar. I focused on English-language literature including, academic textbooks, peer-reviewed materials and government research reports. The quality of the sources used was ensured by including literature that was either peer-reviewed or met academic research standards. The review yielded material mostly from Western countries, which reflects the parameters of the search. When material was found, a “snowball” technique was used to identify any further sources from the reference lists.

The following terms were relevant when I first searched the literature: “new graduate”; “graduate experiences”; “first-year practitioners”; “early-career social work”; and “newly qualified social worker”. I used several terms because I discovered a variety of terminology within the knowledge base. This discovery is similar to Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens and Hussein’s (2011) literature review.
These authors also noticed it was common for studies to include practitioners with varying years of practice. Due to these variations in terminology, and years of experience, I defined newly qualified social workers as those who have graduated and are in their first 12 months post-qualification period. Throughout many of the studies examined in the literature review, newly qualified social work voices were not always central, but the research does provide worthwhile insights into experiences and issues impacting newly qualified social workers’ development and work.

The second stage of the literature review occurred when I further refined my topic to focus exclusively on the lived experience of identity. The process reflected how the literature review “overlaps with the process of determining and refining a purpose for study” (Earley, 2009, p. 103). I revisited databases and the literature with search terms such as “social work identity”; “professional identity”; and “identity”. I followed the same process of gathering material and snowballing to find any further sources. At times my supervisors also provided literature. The results of this review are discussed in the next chapter. Finally, the third stage of the literature review occurred when writing up and editing the thesis to ensure all literature and themes were current. Throughout all stages I categorised and re-categorised the literature into core themes for writing up.

**Transition and Development**

One of the largest areas of research into newly qualified social workers has been about their transition and learning and development as they move from student to practitioner. Research into this area began many years ago and it explored such topics as support for transition into work (Pockett, 1987); employment opportunities (Brown, 1983, 1986; Franklin & Eu, 1996); gender inequities (Fortune & Hanks, 1988); emotional impacts, organisational demands, constraints and acculturation (Wasserman, 1970, 1971); development of practice frameworks over time (O’Connor & Dalgleish, 1986); and the relationships between university education, professional associations and practice realities (Brennan, 1972). A major theme woven throughout these older studies is that new practitioners need to be able to transition and flourish in their roles after they resolve their anxieties and fears about being in a new position. Many of these themes were relevant within the current knowledge base. Recent studies investigate how newly qualified social workers transition and experience their workplace as well as learn and develop as beginning practitioners.
**Transition.** Le Maistre and Paré (2004) argue that the experience of education, where students operate within a safe environment of experimentation, can be quite different to the experience of the workplace. Transitioning as a beginning practitioner involves “bursting the bubble” and being “thrown into the deep end”. This is supported in an Australian longitudinal study in the 1990s, where most participants described their first year of practice positively despite facing some daunting challenges, where they were “…thrown into the ‘deep end’ of practice, frantically swimming as they were confronted with new situations for which they must take responsibility” (Fook et al., 2000, p. 79). The literature commonly referred to newly qualified social workers as burgeoning professionals, who were focused on survival and had to engage in learning challenges so they could transition and develop knowledge, skill, confidence, professional identity, and a reputation over time (Cameron, 2003; Fook et al., 2000; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004). Their transition could be seen as a rite of passage, and with the appropriate recognition and support, social workers can be given a good start (Bradley, 2008).

Transition models from various disciplines have been applied to conceptualise and explain social work experiences in the first year of practice. An example is an apprenticeship approach, where new practitioners are said to begin at a novice level and work towards becoming experts over many years of practice (Donnellan & Jack, 2015). Galpin, Bigmore, and Parker (2012) capture this by advising “Think of your first year in practice as an apprenticeship or as a time to build expertise and develop from a novice to a professional with professional knowledge” (p. 75).

It is also recognised that despite any previous experience one might have in the field, there are transitional and developmental changes that return new social workers to novice stages when entering the field (Donnellan & Jack, 2015). The completion of formal university study does not mean practitioners emerge as complete “products”. This view stands in contrast to dominant neo-conservative ideologies, which Newberry (2014) argues perceive new practitioners as being capable of “hitting the ground running” (p. 43) with little support and resources.

Fenge (2013) and Galpin et al. (2012) use a role transition model developed by Nicholson (1990). It is based on four cyclical stages – *preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilisation*, which is portrayed diagrammatically by Blair (2000, p. 75).
233) in Figure 1. The model details what practitioners can reflect on as they transition and identifies helpful ways to deal with the phase they are experiencing (Blair, 2000).

Figure 1. Phases of role transition. Adapted from “The centrality of occupation during life transitions” by S. E. E. Blair, 2000, The British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 63, p. 233. Copyright 2000 by Sage Publishing.

Fenge (2013) uses this transition model to advise newly qualified social workers on how to move from study to practice. Fenge (2013) argues that the transition from study to practice can be unsettling and disruptive as the sense of self changes. Professional identity is described as a live issue, where new social workers will experience an important shift in how they see themselves, adapt to new roles, and take on expectations from others, such as colleagues and employers. However, it was not clear whether those views are based on research with social workers.
Galpin et al. (2012, pp. 24–25) build on Nicholson’s (1990) transition model by combining it with a three-phase model from management studies developed by Bridges (1986). The model is outlined as follows:

1. Endings (preparation)
2. In-between (encounter and adjustment)
3. New beginning (stabilisation).

They argue it can take six to 12 months to complete all the phases of transition, but strict time frames should not be placed on each phase so that room is provided for individual variation (Galpin et al., 2012). The first phase, endings, relates to completing studies and preparing for the transition from student to practitioner. During this time, it is important to be mindful of emotional challenges and the sense of loss in leaving university (Galpin et al., 2012). The in-between phase occurs after overcoming challenging emotions associated with the initial transition (Bridges, 1986). At this point, new practitioners encounter and adjust to the field by settling into their new role and the associated expectations, and acknowledge the various changes they experience during this time (Galpin et al., 2012). This phase is the bridge towards the final phase, where practitioners become more proficient and thus stable in their new life.

**Learning and development.** Alongside transition, newly qualified social workers were said to be in an important phase of learning and development, which can involve overcoming a range of challenges and needs for supervision. In this area, a commonly cited model is used in social work to explain how practitioners acquire knowledge and skill (Moriarty et al., 2011). It was developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus in the 1980s (as cited in Donnellan & Jack, 2015, p. 52; as cited in Fook et al., 2000, p. 11; as cited in Galpin et al., 2012, p. 32). There are five levels of knowledge and skill professionals advance through over time: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert (Galpin et al., 2012). It is believed professionals move from structured practice that relies strongly on rules (novice) to intuitive decision-making that draws from a wealth of knowledge (expert).

In the UK, Donnellan and Jack (2015) propose newly qualified social workers are likely to be at the competent stage when entering the field as they can draw on some past knowledge and skill for conscious decision-making, but still have some significant development to complete. They reinforce that progression is not
necessarily linear nor are there fixed points of experiences. In contrast to this, the earlier Fook et al. (2000) study postulated that the new graduates, in their Australian study, were at the competent stage by the end of their first year of practice, not the beginning. The study aimed to understand how practitioners develop professional expertise. The results indicated that new social workers would conform to organisational contexts and, at times, operate without professional values. The newly qualified social workers wanted to thrive and be seen to be doing a good job. At times this meant confronting differences between their expectations about what it would be like to practise as a social worker and the realities of organisational demands, findings which were similar to other studies (Agllias, 2010; Cameron, 2003; Harré Hindmarsh, 1992; Jones, Donnellan & Owens, 2009; Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, & Sharpe, 2015).

By the end of their first year of practice, participants in the Australian study had developed their knowledge and skill and were becoming increasingly reflexive as they could draw on previous experiences to inform decision-making (Fook et al., 2000). Some links with professional identity were found as the newly qualified social workers were concerned with developing their sense of professionalism and a fit between their personal and professional selves (Ryan, Fook & Hawkins, 1995). These findings provide a sense of the features that are central to the newly qualified period, such as developing confidence, skill, knowledge, reflexivity and professional identity.

While the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model was commonly used, it was questioned as to whether it accurately captured the development of expertise or experience (Fook et al., 2000). Despite this, new practitioners, especially in UK, were encouraged to use the model to reflect on and track changes in their professional development (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Galpin et al., 2012).

**Challenges.** In the UK, several books have been written to support practitioners’ transition to the workplace and their ongoing learning and development as they face a range of challenges. Donnellan and Jack (2015) have used the following title: *The Survival Guide for Newly Qualified Child and Family Social Workers: Hitting the Ground Running*. A similar title has also been used by Galpin et al. (2012), who focused on adult and mental health services. Both books include images of athletes either jumping or in the starting blocks. This indicates that the first year requires significant preparation prior to starting, ongoing training, and an ability to move fast. It also implies there are winners and losers in the race, who “hit the ground running”.

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The imagery conveys that the first year involves “change”, “competition”, “challenge” and “focus”. The authors utilise these themes by exploring the transition experience and how to thrive over the first year of employment, with book chapters titled “Warming Up”, “Jumping the Hurdles”, and “Going the Distance” (Donnellan & Jack, 2015).

The books designed for newly qualified social workers in the UK, draw from research, where practitioners reported stark learning and development challenges that they eventually conquered over time. Participants expressed anxiety, fear and uncertainty in facing new challenges, roles and workplace demands. For some, a gap between study and practice was noticed as “…newly qualified social workers often find they do not fit comfortably into their new organisations” (Keen & Parker, 2013, p. 1). They realised there can be a difference between study and reality that required adjustment and a re-assessment of expectations (Donnellan & Jack, 2015).

These themes were picked up in other studies, where heavy workloads and emotional demands led to some practitioners describing their first year as traumatic (Jack & Donnellan, 2010) and that they experienced a “baptism of fire” because they were not given enough time to transition into their new role (Bates et al., 2010). In Australia, graduates in Cameron’s (2003) study emphasised there was a necessary period of learning on the job, and there were some workplace demands for which they were not fully prepared. The study concluded that university curricula should prepare graduates to be reflexive so they can face these realities (Cameron, 2003).

Other studies emphasised a range of challenges that were experienced within organisational and socio-cultural contexts, which included emotional resilience (Kinman & Grant, 2016); time management, gaining experience, and engaging with others who have contrasting perspectives (Fook et al., 2000); and a lack of access to experienced social workers who can educate and support them (An & Chapman, 2014; Yan, Gao, & Lam, 2013).

In Australia, Agllias (2010) outlined three distinct challenges that were faced by her participants: “…value and ethical issues, perceptions of social work, and reflective practice” (Agllias, 2010, p. 350). First, practitioners were surprised to find experienced social workers not adhering to the same ethical standards they had acquired in their studies. The participants were motivated not to be acculturated into “bad” practices and wanted to maintain the experiences and learning they acquired.
from their education. The findings of the Agllias study were similar to those from earlier research completed in New Zealand, where graduates strived for autonomy and saw themselves in opposition to others when their conceptions of good social work were hindered (Harré Hindmarsh, 1992). This study highlighted the continuing discussions regarding the gaps between university ideals and practice realities to which newly qualified workers had to adapt.

The second challenge Agllias (2010) discovered was in relation to how others perceived or misunderstood social work, which sometimes led to conflict and ambiguity regarding the participants’ roles in their workplaces. To deal with this, some new graduates focused on establishing clear role boundaries around what they could and could not do (Agllias, 2010). This issue was also emphasised in China, where the profession is re-emerging during a time of significant socio-cultural change at the macro level. There is a lack of understanding of professional social work in society and territorial issues with “lay social workers” – people who have undertaken social work-type activities previously but do not have formal qualifications (An & Chapman, 2014). New social workers have to deal with a high turnover of professionals and there are few experienced practitioners to provide them with mentoring and practice wisdom (Yan et al., 2013). Both Chinese studies mentioned professional identity, but lived experience of the phenomenon was not clearly captured or described. The studies’ discussion focused only on internalising values and perceptions of the professional role.

The final challenge described in Agllias’ (2010) study was about finding time and space for reflection, to consider practice and growth as a person and professional. The study indicated this was difficult to achieve even within the allocated supervision time. Agllias (2010) recommends curricula development and better engagement with employers to ease graduate transition into practice. As a recent Australian study, Agllias’s (2010) work provides a stepping stone for further in-depth exploration, especially on professional identity, as it was not extensively researched in her study.

**Supervision experiences and needs.** As part of learning and development, several studies considered the role and experience of supervision. Jones et al. (2009) developed a comprehensive research report and toolkit for new practitioners and line managers in England. Drawing from perceptions and experiences of supervision, a range of the following themes emerged: encroachment of managerial approaches
upon reflective learning and development; training access for line managers; negotiation of clear boundaries within the supervision relationship; priority of supervision in light of heavy workloads; relevance of engaging in mutual learning; and recognition of the importance of informal supervision and support from colleagues. Supervision was found to be a crucial part of the first year of practice. It was effective when undertaken consistently. It highlighted newly qualified social workers’ successes in practice and was able to incorporate reflection and development.

Supervisors played an integral part in personal and professional development including building confidence. This was achieved when supervision was a testing ground for knowledge and skill development, which allowed for quality feedback from supervisors (Jones et al., 2009). The recognition of adjusting to the transition process and developing a new professional identity was highlighted, although how this could be integrated into reflective supervision was not clearly explored within their research. Their findings were similar to those in New Zealand, where Pack (2014) explored supervision needs in mental health; the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee was found to be crucial for reflective learning.

There have been concerns in England that managers tend to emphasise assessment and performance management of the individual practitioner in supervision as opposed to the wider context, which includes organisational culture, resources and demands. This was raised in a longitudinal study, where managers discussed how supervision became less frequent over time, and many saw the purpose of supervision as administrative and for discussing how cases were managed. There were positive signs that quality supervision based on support and reflection can have an impact on newly qualified social workers’ development and job satisfaction (Manthorpe et al., 2015). Nonetheless, for some managers, a lack of resources and staff were raised as significant barriers to providing sufficient support (Manthorpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Hussein, & Sharpe, 2014). It would be interesting to explore how professional identity is developed within the context of supervision, as well as perceptions of experiences with supervisors who are not line managers. Whilst the Jones et al. (2009) report touched on power differentials between practitioners and line managers within supervision, conflicts of interest and tensions within these environments were not fully explored.
Preparedness for Practice

The question of whether newly qualified social workers are prepared for practice has been a subject of interest for many years (Mahler, 1982), with much of the research focused on the impact of social work degrees and identifying opportunities for curricula development. Earlier studies highlighted the importance of ensuring graduates had sufficient knowledge and clinical skill (Miller & Robb, 1997) and were prepared for organisational settings characterised by tensions, lack of support for induction, and a range of expectations such as instrumental skills (Eadie & Lymbery, 2002; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Many of these themes were present in current studies; however, caution was advised when investigating preparation for practice. In a review of new graduate literature Newberry (2011) highlights that contextual differences between countries can impact preparation and therefore must be taken into consideration. An example of this is in the UK and Australia. The former moved from a diploma of social work to a three-year degree in the early 2000s, and since then there have been ongoing questions about how well the new UK degree prepares graduates (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2015). Alternatively, Australia has a four-year accredited degree. While there may be commonalities between these two countries on perceptions of preparedness for practice, there may also be important differences that must be taken into consideration.

Sense of preparation. In recent studies across several countries, new practitioners generally report that they were prepared for practice (Agllias, 2010; Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2016; Hunt, Lowe, Smoth, Kuruvila, & Webber-Dreadon, 2016). In the UK, Nix, Cooper, Davis, and McCormick (2009) aimed to establish the effectiveness of the new social work degree. Within the first six months of practice, participants indicated their confidence had improved, and this was informed by degree study. Participants stated that their studies impacted on their knowledge and skill and gave them a stronger sense of professional identity. Having a social work identity was regarded as an important part of their future within the profession (Nix et al., 2009). The value of a social work degree was also prevalent in the state of New South Wales, Australia, where Cortis and Meagher (2012) explored the preparedness for non-government practice by comparing perceptions between social workers and other human service practitioners. The sample included direct-practice workers who had completed their qualification within the past 10 years. Almost half were recent graduates (two years or less since they graduated). Social workers reported higher
levels of preparation than other, less qualified human service workers (Cortis & Meagher, 2012). However, these studies were focused on perceptions of preparation, and often newly qualified social workers were the focus of assessment and performance management, and were denied opportunities to rate their managers and supervisors (Moriarty et al., 2011).

Several studies across Australia, Europe and New Zealand explored students’ perceptions of being prepared for practice when their graduation was imminent. The relevance of keeping preparedness for practice at the forefront of educators’ minds was again raised. In general, students were found to be aware of the challenges they would be facing once they had graduated (Agllias, 2010) and they appreciated how their education had changed them (Wilson, 2013). However, some were ambivalent about how to use theory (Frost, Höjer, & Campanini, 2013) and were starkly aware of their inexperience, which included skill development in conflict management (Wilson, 2013). Some of these findings reflect similar findings from Fook et al. (2000) and Nix et al. (2009) with graduates in the field.

**Gaps in preparation.** Nix et al. (2009) discovered that UK new graduates saw themselves as under-prepared for working with hostile clients; a similar finding was described in a prior Australian study, where conflict management was perceived as an under-developed skill, as well as working with men (Ryan et al., 1995). In Scotland, graduates were found to have a lack of confidence in instrumental or technical skills, such as writing case notes or using technology (Grant et al., 2016). Bates et al. (2010) also found that in England practical/instrumental or technical skills, such as report writing and time management, needed further development. They advocate for fostering critical thinking and analytical skills, as new social workers balance a range of competing interests between their values, government, and organisational contexts. Bates et al. (2010) suggest that better transition support between education and organisations could address these aspects.

In terms of field placement, newly qualified social workers in Israel placed less value on field education in preparing them for complex aspects of practice (Zeira & Schiff, 2014). Issues with field placement were also reinforced in a Swedish study, where 13 graduating students reported mixed views about preparation. Participants emphasised they would have preferred more practical experience during their studies. This perception did not surprise the authors, who stated field practice was not highly
prioritised and was reduced to one practicum in Sweden (Tham & Lynch, 2014). These findings are an important example of contextual differences that can exist between countries.

Mixed views about preparation for practice also emerged in child welfare and protection. In Australia, Healy and Meagher (2007) engaged with a wide-ranging sample of practitioners, which included some new graduates. Ambivalence regarding preparation was found amongst the groups and the authors indicated a need to add specialist components to education curricula, especially as this field is a significant employer of graduates. It was argued revisiting this area could be of interest to track any further developments, especially as the AASW currently requires distinct child wellbeing and protection content in curricula (Zufferey & Gibson, 2012).

**Tensions about preparation.** There have been ongoing tensions between universities and employers in relation to who is responsible for areas of learning and development (Bates et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2016; Howard, Johnston, & Agllias, 2015; Moriarty et al., 2011). These tensions were based on differing views of the purposes of education and readiness for practice; is it to ensure graduates can “hit the ground running” (Newberry, 2014, p. 43), or be an “end product” (Moriarty et al., 2011, p. 1346)? Or, is the purpose of education to produce generic practitioners ready to learn and develop within their specific environments? In the UK, Clapton (2013) asks whether universities should play a role during transition stages as part of preparedness for practice. Clapton (2013) argues that there is a period between completion of study, graduation and employment, where further support could be targeted. The author piloted a module for a small group of new practitioners, and found there was interest for this type of support. However, formal evaluation of the module has yet to be undertaken and therefore further research and development is recommended.

Tensions between universities and employers were further explored in a case study involving a newly qualified social worker, a colleague and a field education director in New Zealand (Hay, Franklin & Hardyment, 2012). The authors argue, as have other studies (Bates et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2015), that all key stakeholders should be in close relationships with each other so that graduates can successfully transition and succeed (Hay et al., 2012). This suggests it is not simply a matter of either/or but that all stakeholders share the responsibility of preparing, transitioning and
developing graduates. Grant et al. (2016) also raised this point in their study on newly qualified social workers in Scotland. Participants reported they were prepared for practice, but were concerned about ongoing access to professional development activities over time. Participants stated university education was only one part of their professional journey, and they needed continued support and development opportunities in the field. The authors reinforce the message that newly qualified social workers are in an important period of transition and development as they emerge from study to consolidate and build on what they have gained and in time become increasingly more experienced (Grant et al., 2016). They also advocate that there should be a close relationship between educators, graduates and employers, to share the responsibility of support and development with newly qualified social workers.

**Perspectives of line managers and employers.** Finally, several studies examined the perspectives of line managers and employers in relation to their views on desirable theoretical qualities (van Bommel, Kwakman, & Boshuizen, 2014), and knowledge and skills for work readiness (Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2016; Howard et al., 2015). An exploratory study in The Netherlands drew from experienced practitioners involved with hiring staff. The participants argued that with the prevalence of evidence-based practice, new workers must have diverse knowledge and analytical skills in order to respond to complex and individual nuances of client situations (van Bommel et al., 2014). In Luxembourg, supervisors also focused on knowledge and skills of newly qualified practitioners, including social work, and assessed whether their readiness for practice was adequate (Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2016). The importance of fostering generic skills in students and graduates was emphasised. In Australia, work readiness was also considered in a small-scale study that consisted of 13 social workers who employ and/or work closely with newly qualified social workers. They identified a range of indicators for work readiness, which included reflective practice and teamwork (Howard et al., 2015). The presence and importance of professional identity was not explored in this literature.

**Induction and Graduate Programs**

Induction and graduate programs have recently emerged in some countries in response to recognising the needs of newly qualified social workers as well as to wider workforce issues. This builds on recognition within other professions such as
nursing, where it is common to have a graduate year (Smith & Pilling, 2007). In social work, these graduate programmes are mostly ad hoc and specific to the context of countries, and fields of practice, especially child welfare and protection. The programs cover a range of time periods, such as initial induction into a workplace or the whole first year of practice.

**Initial induction.** As part of initial induction, several studies from the United States of America (USA), the UK, Canada and Australia emphasised the importance of supervision and mentoring, workplace relationships, socialisation processes, and building practitioner confidence (Hancock et al., 2003; Jaskyte, 2005; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004; McPherson & Barnett, 2006). The overall message was that induction needs to be formalised as part of transitioning and socialising new practitioners, and the learning needs of practitioners should be recognised, including giving them a caseload that is commensurate with their level of ability (Bradley, 2008). Newly qualified social workers must be actively engaged in their learning and development as individuals as well as receive meaningful systemic support that meets their needs. An example of this was detailed in a Canadian study, where a social support group was established and covered a range of topics related to self-care and development. The importance of relevant support structures for practitioners in highly stressful environments was again highlighted (Csiernik, Smith, Dewar, Dromgole, & O’Neill, 2010).

**Longer programs.** Programs covering longer periods emphasise the recognition of diverse and changing needs and relevant supervision. In allied health in Australia, Smith and Pilling (2007) evaluated a 10-month graduate program that included some social workers. The program aimed to build interdisciplinary relationships, and ensure newcomers could safely share their experiences in a group environment. Developing confidence, competence and teamwork skills were reinforced in the findings. Many reported that their support needs changed after six months as a result of feeling more settled as professionals. The authors posited that this reflected key periods of transition and development during the first year of practice (Smith & Pilling, 2007).

In England, Jack and Donnellan (2010) conclude that the first year of practice must be supported with embedded structures that allow room for the individual backgrounds of practitioners to be considered. This conclusion has been supported by
more recent research in England that indicates embedding new support practices within workplaces has benefited newly qualified social workers. The first year of practice can now be assessed and supported as part of a national graduate program (Carpenter, et al., 2012; Carpenter, Shardlow, Patsios, & Wood, 2015). Newly qualified social workers have reported increased self-efficacy in terms of confidence and competence. Reflective supervision has also been an integral support and development mechanism. After several years, the program has become more embedded within workplaces and the main objectives, such as improved job satisfaction and retention rates, are being met (Carpenter et al., 2015). However, stress and demands of the workplace have remained an important theme that can impact meeting the needs of newly qualified social workers (Carpenter et al., 2012).

In a New Zealand study, similar challenges were also experienced by new practitioners, and the importance of ongoing support and recognition around workload needs were raised (Hunt et al., 2016). These recent studies add weight to arguments that the transition from student to practitioner is an important phase of development and needs to be well supported; however, there was little or no mention of professional identity formation and maintenance amongst the assessments of the graduate programs. While newly qualified social workers might experience an increase in their confidence, how does it relate to their overall professional identity?

**Job Satisfaction and Retention**

Job satisfaction and retention in social work is a concern across many countries (Chiller & Crisp, 2012). In the UK, for example, one study found that the expected working life of social workers was around eight years, which was significantly lower than for other healthcare professionals, such as 25 years for doctors (Curtis et al., 2010). From this context, concerns about retention and burnout have contributed towards a greater focus on support for newly qualified social workers (Carpenter et al., 2015).

In Australia, the human services sector, especially the non-government organisations, has grown rapidly in recent decades (Cheron-Sauer, 2012; Healy & Lonne, 2010). The sector faces a range of difficulties, including the retention and turnover of staff, across a range of fields such as disabilities, aged care, homelessness, and child protection (Australian Council of Social Services [ACOSS], 2013; ACOSS, 2014;
There are particular concerns about retention in statutory child protection services in Australia and internationally (Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009). Practitioners with little experience increasingly take on complex work, while there is a high turnover of experienced staff. Healy et al. (2009) state it can be difficult to uncover rates of staff turnover, which was also highlighted in a report that sought data on the child protection workforce in Australia (Institute of Child Protection Studies [ICPS], 2012). Of the five Australian states who submitted workforce information, there were varying numbers of staff who left child protection over the 2010–11 financial year, with the highest being 22 per cent in Queensland (ICPS, 2012). It has been estimated that the wider sector replaces about one-quarter of human service workers annually (Martin et al., 2012).

Despite these numbers, the specific turnover of social workers, including those who were newly qualified, was not obvious from the statistics. According to Cheron-Sauer (2012), the quality of Australian national data on retention of social workers is lacking, which could be because the profession is not regulated, and so data is not systematically collected by regulatory authorities. Nonetheless, there are ongoing concerns about workforce sustainability (Healy et al., 2015), and that a significant number of graduates do not enter the sector at all after graduation, or leave within a few years (Cheron-Sauer, 2012). There are calls for a better understanding of graduate needs (Healy et al., 2015) and coordinated workforce strategies (Healy & Lonne, 2010), with a detailed focus on retention mechanisms (Cheron-Sauer, 2012) such as supervision (Chiller & Crisp, 2012).

Across various studies in the UK, Ireland and the USA, which examined the job satisfaction and retention of newly qualified social workers or new employees, workplace conditions were found to have a significant impact, including the elements of induction; relational support and supervision; career pathways; balanced workload; and being able to build self-efficacy, especially around applying social work values (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2016; Burns, 2011; Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Hussein, Moriarty, Stevens, Sharpe, & Manthorpe, 2014; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2009; Sharpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Manthorpe, & Hussein,
Ongoing access to professional development and learning was also emphasised (Hussein et al., 2014).

These findings regarding workplace conditions were repeated in the only Australian study on the topic, which focused on newly qualified practitioners who had a range of qualifications, and were in their first year of employment (Healy et al., 2015). In the first stage of their large project, a pilot survey was conducted in Queensland. Thirty-three of the participants resided in cities, 24 lived in rural and regional locations, and two participants did not disclose where they lived. Eleven of the participants had a social work qualification (Healy et al., 2015). Most of the participants described being satisfied in their job (88 per cent), and just over half (59 per cent) were planning to stay in their current organisation for the next three to five years. Those living in regional and rural locations were more likely to consider leaving sometime in the next five years because of issues such as isolation and less access to supervision and professional development (Healy et al., 2015).

Most of the issues that negatively impacted on job satisfaction were about organisational and funding contexts as opposed to clients. The perceived competence of managers was raised as part of participants’ concerns. These organisational factors were also important in deciding whether to stay, as well as opportunities for career advancement, (Healy et al., 2015).

Professional identity was also measured in this study; participants were asked to rate their sense of belonging and identification with their profession/occupational group. Most of the participants strongly identified with their profession or occupation, which was based on emotional connections and the alignment of values. However, one social work graduate was quoted as saying that while they shared the worldview of the profession, they did not have a “…need to be a part of the ‘group’ social workers…” (Healy et al., 2015, p. 19).

Personal reasons that impacted on job satisfaction and/or retention were implicated in some studies. Low pay and life-stage issues were emphasised in the Australian study (Healy et al., 2015). In China, researchers looked at reasons 20 new graduates did not pursue a social work position at all (Cheung, Zeng, Leung & He, 2015). Their reasons included a combination of individual and social factors such as low pay, a lack of a career pathway, work stress, a lack of professional skill and status in social work, a lack of personal ability, and a lack of personal and structural support and resources.
The participants’ concerns reflected the same concerns expressed in other studies that highlighted the unique challenges faced by social workers in China, such as the rapid expansion of the profession and the insufficient numbers of experienced workers to teach or mentor emerging graduates (An & Chapman, 2014; Yan et al., 2013).

Many of these studies considered several years of practice, and some focused on inexperienced/experienced workers in a new job. The voices and experiences of newly qualified social workers were not always clear in these samples but were likely to be present. Many of the findings were consistent with the broader knowledge base advocating organisational support for newly qualified social workers. Much of this research was in child welfare and protection due to the excessively high turnover rates of staff. It would be of interest to expand this focus to consider a range of fields, as has been done by Hussein et al. (2014). Also, it would be of interest to see how professional identity is explicitly connected to job satisfaction and retention, which Healy et al. (2015) recommend.

**Themes and Gaps in the Literature**

There is an expansive knowledge base on newly qualified social workers from a range of countries. However, most of those countries are Western nations and the studies have been written in English. A range of cultural contexts are likely to be excluded, which could limit the depth of the research. Recent studies have focused on transition and development in practice, job satisfaction and retention, preparation for practice, supervision and induction. The research has consistently emphasised the difficult emotions and challenges practitioners face, especially in their first few months after graduation. The research has also revealed that their sense of self evolves as they transition from their identity as a student to that of a qualified professional who has adjusted to a new role and the expectations of the position, and has consolidated their studies over time. This period is a crucial part of establishing and maintaining not only commitment to current employment but also to the broader profession. Questions are consistently raised about the extent to which retention and turnover are a problem for newly qualified social workers in Australia. Cheron-Sauer (2012) notes that a problem with retention exists, but there is insufficient data, including on the numbers of new workers (Healy et al., 2015), which makes it difficult to fully understand the magnitude of the problem and how to respond with effective strategies.
The importance of developing self-efficacy in terms of confidence and competence was frequently noted in recent studies. Newly qualified social workers must be proactive and responsible for their professional development, but it has also been acknowledged that new social workers are interdependent on the wider organisational and social context. Throughout the literature, a constant important message was that newly qualified social workers require formal and informal support. There was broad agreement that graduates are not “finished products” at the end of their tertiary studies and therefore universities and employers both need to share the responsibility of supporting and developing newly qualified practitioners and meeting their changing needs, especially during their initial induction. England now has a national graduate program, but in other countries, including Australia, formal programs for graduates are usually developed within specific organisations, based on their needs, and are largely ad hoc.

A range of studies reinforced that support within organisations was necessary, but such support was a major challenge to create when resources were limited, which was very often the case. In general, it was not clear whether resource limitations were exacerbated by geographical location, such as living in a rural context, as this had not been generally explored or highlighted in the findings. One study, however, emphasised the isolation and less formal support in rural and regional locations, which prompted calls for further research (Healy et al., 2015). Manthorpe et al. (2014) state that it was unsurprising that managers reported that they struggled to provide adequate support when resources were diminished. This highlights the contradictions in the socio-cultural context in England (and possibly elsewhere), where there were pushes to see newly qualified social workers supported and retained, and yet managers frequently said they did not have adequate resources. In response to this, many of the studies discuss how future graduates needed to be better prepared for those challenging workplace environments so they can “hit the ground running”. Newberry (2014) argues this can be contradictory and challenges the way in which books have been designed for newly qualified social workers (for example, Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Galpin et al., 2012). These books use imagery and the phrase “hitting the ground running”. Newberry (2014) is concerned that much of the terminology in the literature reflects a neo-conservative discourse which frames social work as an activity of warfare; that practitioners must be able to operate within a strict command and control hierarchy as technicians, with little room for professional
autonomy. Practitioners are expected to transition quickly into workplaces, with little support and resources for induction and ongoing development, thus, again, “hitting the ground running.”

Newberry (2014) encourages the profession to become mindful of the possibility of dominant discourses penetrating and impacting practice. As newly qualified practitioners were in a development phase of their career, the profession should be willing to challenge perceptions that these practitioners needed little support. It would be worthwhile undertaking a holistic focus on micro (individual), meso (relational and organisational), and macro (social) dimensions that impact on newly qualified social workers’ experiences and development of professional identity.

Another gap in the literature is that it narrowly focuses on experiences in the first year of employment (practice), and it is not clear what the backgrounds are of many of the participants who feature in these studies. Did they have prior jobs in the human services field? Are they mostly young school leavers, or are they mature-aged students? Does the location of where they live impact on their job-seeking success and their access to support and resources? While the first year of employment (practice) is important, what happens if a graduate completes study but does not secure a job straightaway? The textbooks write about job seeking, but the experiences of new graduates undertaking this process are largely absent from the research. As Cheung et al. (2015) highlight, some social workers will graduate and never enter the profession. There is an opportunity here to capture the diverse experiences and backgrounds of graduates as they move beyond their university studies, rather than making their entry into a job the starting point of researching their experiences. It would be beneficial to begin at the point of qualification and follow the whole journey of newly qualified social workers.

Finally, professional identity is implied within much of this literature, but not explored in-depth as a topic in its own right. One exception is Healy et al. (2015) who explored aspects of professional identity as part of investigating job satisfaction and retention. Professional identity was raised as an important feature of the first year but it was not clearly conceptualised, nor were experiences of professional identity studied extensively. Furthermore, the transition and development models were either dated or were developed in other disciplines. It is not clear whether these models resonate with social work experiences. Changes in professional identity were only
tacitly acknowledged in these models and in most other studies. There was no significant exploration of the dimensions of change in professional identity and how it was experienced as part of transition and development. For example, in the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model, only the acquisition of knowledge and skill were explored, thus privileging dimensions of knowing/thinking and doing. This was common in other studies, where aspects of professional identity were generally examined in terms of knowledge, skill and the internalisation of values, but the broader ontological dimensions of professional identity were neglected. Therefore, it is not clear how relevant these various models are to contemporary social work. There have been calls for further research into social work identity, including connections to job satisfaction (Healy et al., 2015). It would be worth inductively exploring the lived experience of professional identity to expand the knowledge base.

**Chapter Summary**

The experiences of newly qualified social workers have been well researched, especially in recent years. Across a number of countries, it was emphasised that newly qualified social workers experience a period of transition and “being new” that requires further learning and development of knowledge, skills, confidence and professional identity. Experiences were enhanced when these recent graduates were appropriately supported and their needs were met in a responsive manner. While professional identity was mentioned as an important part of the journey, it was less clear how it was researched in social work. Seeing professional identity included throughout these texts and studies prompted me to look more closely at the topic, and ask the following question: What research exists that explored the professional identities of newly qualified social workers? This question led to the second phase of the literature review.
Chapter 3
Professional Identity of Students and Newly Qualified Social Workers

In this chapter, I return to the literature with a narrower focus on professional identity. First, I explore literature in relation to the development of social work identity in students as a substantial amount of research exists concerning this group. I then outline the small number of references and studies regarding newly qualified social workers, which emphasises experiences related to constructing, developing, and even rejecting a professional identity. This literature review also led to the identification of themes and gaps that informed the theoretical framework and research design of this study.

Development of Social Work Identity in Students

A number of studies have explored how the identities of social work students develop during their education. The studies investigated students’ preferences in practice, connections between personal and professional identities, and pedagogical tools. It is not surprising that many studies focused on students because “professional education imparts values and identity as well as knowledge to students” (Valutis, Rubin, & Bell, 2012, p. 1047). A coherent professional identity can be an important part of building resilience in students so that they can face various challenges as qualified practitioners (Beddoe, 2003; Beddoe, Davys & Adamson, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand how students develop a professional identity. However, education is not a simple linear process that sees students emerge with a common identity. Identity construction has been argued to be nuanced, ongoing, fluid and influenced by the social contexts practitioners enter (Oliver, 2013; Wiles, 2012). It is not simply about acquiring shared values as a professional identity is constructed within various discourses about professional qualities, collective identity with others, and a sense of individual development (Wiles, 2012). Mackay and Zufferey (2015) undertook some research on discourses that were conveyed by social work educators at two universities in the state of South Australia. They found that the educators constructed social work identity around “professional, helping/caring, emancipatory and social control discourses to highlight the typical story of social work” (p. 6). The educators also articulated social work as a recognisable profession that had boundaries around who is included and excluded. It was concluded that these discourses were at times
contradictory and further research was needed to understand possible impacts on
students (Mackay & Zufferey, 2015).

Various dimensions of professional identity have been researched, such as the
development and application of values (Woodward & Mackay, 2012), theoretical and
practice orientations (Frost et al., 2013; Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008) and
professional preferences (Weiss, Gal, & Cnaan, 2004). The first study highlighted
how students tend to apply values at the micro level as opposed to the structural
found students tended to favour an individual focus for practice. However, they also
found an equal distribution between micro and macro orientations of students in
Israel (Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008). Frost et al. (2013) found that students
across England, Italy and Sweden drew from macro theories. Weiss et al. (2004)
explored the professional preferences of students as an indicator of how they
embraced professional values. Drawing from cohorts in Israel and the USA, direct
practice was generally found to be most preferred. These studies showed that micro
levels of practice and theories tend to dominate more across various countries, largely
in the global north.

In England, an extensive project found many students were motivated to study social
work because of altruistic ideals, which the authors argue could have been an
important part of retaining them in the profession (Stevens et al., 2012). Motivations
were also raised in the USA by Osteen (2011), who found strong connections
between personal values and motivations to join social work. The relationship
between personal and professional identities was raised as students developed as
people as well as social workers. These findings related to how professional identity
integrates personal and professional aspects of self as defined by Dewane (2006). In
Osteen’s (2011) study, three categories of identity were observed. First, those who
had melded these aspects of self were seen to have achieved an integrated identity.
For others, there was a non-integrated or evolving identity. Osteen (2011) concludes
that despite congruency between personal and professional values, resolving conflicts
between values requires further attention within social work curricula. The
importance of being self-aware of personal values was also raised by Shlomo, Levy
and Itzhaky (2012). In their Israeli study, they found that students needed to articulate
the personal dimension as part of developing their professional identity.
Several authors explore and discuss how social identities intersect with the professional, such as cultural (Haj-Yahia, 1997; Osteen, 2011) and ethnic (Miehls, 2001). Haj-Yahia (1997) highlights the importance of recognising the cultural identities of students from Arab backgrounds, as dominant Western values in social work can differ from their own. Miehls (2001) appreciates the opportunities afforded by diverse classrooms. Students from various backgrounds can engage in deconstructing aspects of cultural dominance as part of a more holistic development of identity. It has been argued that this moves students from positions of perceived objectivity and neutrality to subjectivity as they can then reflect upon aspects of self, including the role of power within relationships (Moffatt & Miehls, 1999).

A project in England found that students who had commenced their studies already held professional identities. These groups came from a range of medical and allied health disciplines such as medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and social work (Adams et al., 2006). Other researchers have uncovered similar findings within social work itself (Hackett, Kuronen, Matthies, & Kresal, 2003; Terum & Heggen, 2015). A supportive education, based on quality relationships, was found to be an important contributor to student development and professional identity (Terum & Heggen, 2015). Adams et al. (2006) raise further questions as to what contributes to the development of professional identity, and how it changes over time, including in the early stages of post-qualification.

Valutis et al. (2012) reinforce the connection between personal identity achievement and age. Drawing from psychological theory, they argue identity tends to be reconciled in years that are beyond the traditional cohorts of universities (18 to 22 years old), which reflects the personal growth journey that one experiences as a human being. It was posited that the extension of education and other life requirements mean that younger people take longer to solidify their identities. They recommend social work educators to be keenly aware of students’ backgrounds, including the relationship between identity achievement and age (Valutis et al., 2012). However, this view assumes a traditional linear approach to identity, which does not capture the experiences of mature-aged students. It neglects the fluid and multilayered nature of identity as experienced by people over their entire lives when they enter new contexts and constantly develop and re-negotiate aspects of self (Moffatt & Miehls, 1999). Moreover, other studies have concluded that students in their first year at university already have a sense of professional identity (Adams et
al., 2006; Hackett et al., 2003). Nonetheless, the findings described by Valutis et al. (2012) have encouraged educators to think about the varying backgrounds and life experiences that students may bring to the classroom that will influence their development of professional identity over time.

Outside of the classroom, Boyer (2008) experienced the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, USA, in 2005, which reinforced connections between the personal and professional. Drawing from a similar study with Israeli students who experienced traumatic events (Baum, 2004), Boyer (2008) reflects on the personal relationship to self that came from her experiences, which included the difficult emotions that arose from experiencing the same kind of tragedies (for example, trauma and the effects of a natural disaster) that social work clients do. Boyer (2008) demonstrates how it is important to critically reflect on one’s personal experiences and shifts in professional identity.

In terms of pedagogical tools for identity development, a range of methods and models have been utilised and evaluated. These methods and models included incorporating mindfulness for developing use of self (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011); tailored classes and programs (Cooper & Pickering, 2010; Millstein, 2005; Pallisera, Fullana, Palaudarias, & Badosa, 2013); study abroad and volunteer experiences (Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2013; Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016; Williams & Reeves, 2004); group activities (Harrison, 2009; Millstein, 2005; Rozas, 2004; Swain, 2007); and assessment items (Sax, 2006).

Most of these studies were focused on engaging in critical reflection within groups to develop awareness of aspects of self. The use of groups was found to be particularly helpful as people can discuss, reflect, problem-solve and identify aspects of self, including values (Harrison, 2009). The importance of experiential learning was emphasised in study-abroad programs, where students experienced a diverse culture, which prompted them to face questions of identity (Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Moorhead et al., 2013). Using students’ Facebook posts, Ranz and Nuttman-Shwartz (2016) collected in-depth descriptions of how their students’ professional identities moved beyond national contexts to a more globalised and multilayered identity based on personal, professional and social domains. Such findings reflected the socially constructed nature of professional identity as students clarified who they were within educational and wider relationships.
Field placement is a central pedagogical tool (Cleak & Wilson, 2013), especially in Australia, where students are required to complete two placements that total one thousand hours (AASW, 2012). Field placement is central because it contributes to developing the professional identities of students and preparation for practice (Bogo, 2015). On a practical level, it can also be an important gateway for gaining a job (Barton, Bell, & Bowles, 2005). In terms of development, field placement can impact personal and professional growth. International field placements can be particularly transformative as students reconcile tourist and student identities (Fox, 2017), and can develop cross-cultural skills firsthand (Cleak et al., 2016a).

In Australia, Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil (2014) found that identity was positively impacted when students were consistently engaged in learning activities, especially supervision. This finding was similar to that of an Israeli study, where a positive supervision relationship had an important connection to professional identity (Levy, Shlomo, & Itzhaky, 2014; Shlomo et al., 2012). Despite this, many participants in the Australian study reported that they did not regularly access learning activities and this hindered their professional identity (Smith et al., 2014). Similar concerns about consistent access to learning activities, including supervision, were raised in a Northern Ireland study (Cleak, Roulston & Vreugdenhil, 2016b).

In China, Wong and Pearson (2007) analysed reflective accounts from student field placements and found identity issues related to how others perceived the profession as it was common for community members to not know the nature and role of social work. Nonetheless, professional growth was achieved by most students through the placement experience. Similar findings also emerged in a Hong Kong study (Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2007). This study emphasised awareness of personal identity as part of reflective practice. Other dimensions of identity within field placement have included developing theoretical and practical skills through learning incidents (Patford, 2000); cross-cultural learning (Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004); development of values (Barlow, 2007; Lindsey, 2005); competence and self-belief (Parker, 2006; Patford, 2000); and awareness of dress as part of expressing values and assessing student capabilities (Scholar, 2012).
These studies have established the importance of developing a professional identity during university study. In Australia, this is captured in the first graduate attribute (Table 1) of the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (AASW, 2012, p. 12).

Table 1

**Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards, First Graduate Attribute**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Graduate Attribute</th>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
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| Demonstrated sense of identity as a professional social worker | • Demonstrated understanding of the role and value of social work in the community  
• The ability to act in accordance with social work knowledge, values and ethics within a human rights framework  
• The ability to apply and transfer knowledge across different fields of social work practice  
• The ability to work for change to address inequalities at all levels. |


This attribute reflects themes in these studies, such as integrating the values and knowledge of the profession, and using this to work across diverse contexts. Such emphasis on developing a professional identity then raises questions about how it is experienced and fostered when students graduate and enter the field.

**Professional Identity of Newly Qualified Social Workers**

The books designed to support newly qualified social workers across the UK, emphasise that it is important to develop a professional identity. For example, Donnellan and Jack (2015) assert that a professional identity based on knowledge and skills enables a social worker to claim distinguishable expertise and sustain their motivations to be in the profession. Fenge (2013) connects professional identity to the transition process by encouraging newly qualified social workers to reflect on how
moving from being a student to a practitioner might change who they are. Fenge (2103) also argues that the transition process includes an emerging social work identity.

Galpin et al. (2012) dedicate a chapter to developing professional identity: “As you develop purpose and professional relationships, you will also need to ensure that you have a strong sense of your own professional identity” (p. 14). They argue professional identity is based on knowledge, skill, expertise and ongoing learning. Practitioners are encouraged to reflect on personal values and beliefs that intersect with being a professional. Quinney (2013) also highlights the importance of professional identity for newly qualified social workers, drawing on broader research and the perspective of one newly qualified practitioner. Relationships and activities that can foster identity were outlined, such as staying connected with other social workers and maintaining meaning/purpose derived from professional values (Keeping, 2006, as cited in Quinney, 2013).

In terms of research into professional identity, an earlier Australian study was conducted in six Melbourne hospitals in 1994 by McMichael (2000). Of the 50 social work participants, eight identified as new graduates with fewer than two years’ experience. It was not clear how many of the eight graduates were in their first 12 months post-qualification period, but their voices were likely to be present. McMichael (2000) asked participants what did it mean to be a “professional” and how did this relate to continuing professional education (CPE). Their descriptions revealed that professional identity could be under threat when CPE was not given a high status in the workplace. The major theme of the study was about the image of social work, including perceived value, status and profile held by other professions and community members. It was found that the value of social work varied across the hospitals and that there were potential issues with self-perception, which indicated a crisis of identity. McMichael (2000) argues for better education for other professionals about the social work role. Social workers are encouraged to critically reflect on their own professional identity to develop confidence and express it more clearly to others. Such conclusions underline the influence of others’ perceptions, especially those who may not always value a social work role.

The importance of internal perceptions was the subject of a more recent small-scale narrative study in Scotland, which focused on self-concept (Kearns & McArdle,
Their study involved three participants in Scotland, who were employed in a statutory children’s service that covered both urban and rural areas. The participants were interviewed at the end of their first year of practice. The researchers discuss the prevalence of a deficit lens within recent literature, which emphasises stress, anxiety and challenges. The authors propose a more positive or strengths-based approach to identity, which is embedded in notions of resilience. They also argue that too much research and discussion was focused on knowledge and skill, which comes at the expense of considering professional identity, and thus a holistic perspective of experiences (Kearns & McArdle, 2011). Such a critique supports the conclusions from the first phase of my study’s literature review on the experiences of newly qualified social workers.

Kearns and McArdle (2011) discovered strong themes around identity formation, as participants could construct who they were (“I am”) as transitioning practitioners, what they could achieve within practice (“I can”), and what was present for them to develop (“I have”). It was important to the participants to have a sense of belonging within their organisation, which developed from relationships that facilitated autonomy and provided formal and informal support. The findings focused on self-concept, such as “I am empathic” (Kearns & McArdle, 2011, p. 6), and revealed participants had a much clearer idea as to what contributed to fostering a sense of self. Participants indicated their induction was enhanced by engaging in reflexivity around identity construction as opposed to just the understanding (“knowing”) and functionality (“doing”) of social work roles (Kearns & McArdle, 2011). While the participants worked in what the authors referred to as a “semi-rural authority”, the findings did not emphasise their rural experiences.

Aspects of self were explored in greater depth in a Canadian study (Jeffery, 2007), which looked at the dimension of ontology. It was argued that many Canadian universities place anti-oppressive practice at the heart of curricula to disrupt traditional modernist/liberal thinking. To explore how students embody this framework as aspects of self, Jeffery interviewed nine new graduates during their first two years of practice. It was not clear where the practitioners lived or worked. Most expressed a commitment to anti-oppressive practice and saw it as a way of being in the world. However, many undertook the same actions that traditional social work does by expressing a fixed and certain identity of “good” and “correct” social work.
Jeffrey (2007) reflected on the lure and dominance of traditional “certainty” based discourses within workplace settings as practitioners are expected to provide fixed and absolute answers to social problems. It was concluded that there was a risk of new practitioners neglecting to take on the major focus of anti-oppressive practice, namely, critically questioning the social work profession itself (Jeffrey, 2007). This study highlights the importance of critical reflection, ontology and personal/professional aspects of identity.

In Europe, Campanini, Frost, and Höjer (2012) discuss a comparative phenomenological study between cities in England, Italy and Sweden. The broad aims of the project included establishing practitioner preparedness for practice and development of professional identity. Participants were interviewed near the end of their studies and at the conclusion of their first year in employment. In asking about theory, practice, and development, Campanini et al. (2012) conclude that all three aspects weaved together and that there were strong connections between personal and professional identities. Participants highlighted the transformative and long-term impacts of their education:

These students discussed issues such as confidence, relationship building, reflection, containment and emotional maturity as both use of self and as professional identification. The training they said had become part of them, and part of how they could respond as workers: who they could be; what they could draw on (Campanini et al., 2012, pp. 41–42).

In continuing the theme of resilience raised by Kearns and McArdle (2011), Italian participants stated a professional identity was important for facing the stress and demands of their workplaces.

The development of professional identity was found to be tied to the national socio-cultural contexts of welfare states. In Italy, practitioners were impacted by employment within mostly short-term contracts and maternity leave positions (Campanini et al., 2012). This reality points to the importance of wider socio-cultural trends that communicate messages about roles and professional identity. In this case, it suggests social work is viewed as an instrumental/technical role that can be readily undertaken in short-term contracts.

Finally, in contrast to the previous themes, an Australian study found ambivalent views about embracing a professional identity. Harrison and Healy (2015) argue that
in Australia there is less stability in employment arrangements and “professional boundaries” (p. 2). Little is known about the development of professional identities within this context, especially with newly qualified practitioners employed in non-government organisations. The first stage of their large project involved a pilot survey (Healy et al., 2015) that was detailed in the previous chapter. The second stage of the project involved focus groups with 32 newly qualified practitioners, employed in the non-government sector. It is not stated whether the participants had also participated in the pilot survey. The focus groups were conducted in an urban location (Brisbane) and two regional locations (Toowoomba and Cairns) in the state of Queensland. The authors did not state how many participants were from each location. Participants had a range of undergraduate degrees, including 11 from social work. Unlike the findings of the pilot survey, Harrison and Healy (2015) found that most participants, including the social workers, were ambivalent or did not overtly identify with their respective profession. Some even rejected a professional identity entirely. Instead, participants were influenced by multiple individual and social contexts, including organisational and personal interests. However, the social workers were values-driven, which seemed to remain a central part of their identity construction, and indicated some contradictions in their views about professional identity. Harrison and Healy (2015) conclude further research was needed on professional identity development, including a longitudinal focus, which would also capture workers in government settings.

These findings provided a platform for my research to further explore the lived experience of professional identity. To fully understand how professional identity can be sustained in social work, it is necessary to look at rich and in-depth experiential knowledge that captures the individual and social context.

**Themes and Gaps in the Literature**

The literature regarding professional identity places a significant focus on students and the investment in them. The common theme is that education must impart beliefs, ethics, values, knowledge and skill that will translate into a professional identity. The research undertaken for the studies consistently emphasised field placement and critical reflection as crucial components to facilitate the development of self-awareness, knowledge and skills in students so that their professional identity will grow and develop alongside their personal identity.
Less is known regarding what happens to the professional identities of newly qualified social workers, including those in rural and regional contexts. Much of the literature reduces professional identity to knowledge and skill. Such an approach neglects gaps that are identified by Bell (2012), where social work regularly overlooks ontology in how its practitioners construct reality and see the world.

Jeffery (2007) argues that there is a need to focus on exploring ontology, epistemology and methodology as part of expressing professional identity. How do newly qualified social workers see, know/think and act, and is it congruent with what they express? Investigations into professional identity need to holistically incorporate notions of being (ontology), knowing/thinking (epistemology) and doing (methodology) to fully capture all dimensions that contribute to who social workers are and how they think and act in the world.

The recent UK textbooks designed to support newly qualified social workers highlight the importance of professional identity but do not research the phenomenon in depth. How can professional identity be fully conceptualised during the newly qualified period without sufficiently investigating how it is experienced by social workers who come from a range of backgrounds? In the research, some samples incorporated a mix of practitioners who had varying years of experience and qualifications, and came from a number of different locations. It was difficult to distinguish newly qualified social workers, or see what their personal backgrounds were, and how this impacted their professional identity. In particular, the impact of whether location affects the development of a professional identity (whether urban or regional) was not explored in the literature.

The small amount of literature that does exist across a few countries concludes that there is a need for further research on professional identity in social work (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Healy et al., 2015; Kearns & McArdle, 2011), especially as social workers face challenging socio-cultural contexts (Campanini et al., 2012). Similar to Harrison and Healy (2015) but years earlier, McMichael (2000) encourages further research, particularly in Australia, by highlighting how professional identity is constructed through relationships and perceptions of others. Both studies emphasised how practitioners actively construct and express their identity (or not) within relational and organisational contexts. Finally, Campanini et al., (2012) contribute by considering the personal and professional aspects of self in identity.
These studies encouraged me to explore the lived experience of professional identity and how it is fostered and/or eroded, taking into consideration the social contexts that newly qualified social work practitioners live and work in. In Australia, understanding practitioners’ professional identities and the manner in which they develop is of interest to the profession, in order to identify appropriate retention strategies.

**Chapter Summary**

Professional identity is central to social work education and is an important part of post-qualification experiences. Current research on professional identity has largely focused on students, emphasising that they can begin their social work study with a professional identity, and then continue to develop it throughout the entire period of their degree studies. When they graduate and experience the initial post-qualification period, newly qualified social workers will further consolidate their professional identities. The few studies on newly qualified social workers revealed that the initial post-qualification period is an important time for growth and development, but more in-depth research on professional identity is needed.
Chapter 4
Theoretical Framework: Ontology and Epistemology

Chapter 4 outlines the theoretical framework that guided me to explore the lived experience of professional identity with newly qualified social workers. The chapter pays particular attention to the ontological and epistemological dimensions of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory. Together, these theories, which largely draw from a Western philosophical lens, facilitate critical, in-depth and holistic engagement with the lived experience of professional identity. The history and development of phenomenology will be first explored to clarify why I chose the hermeneutic tradition. Second, critical social work theory is described and justified to build on the phenomenological approach. The chapter will conclude by outlining the theoretical framework to demonstrate how the ontological and epistemological dimensions are applied to my study.

History and Development of Phenomenology

While phenomenology is most commonly used as a methodology for research (van Manen, 2014), it incorporates a lens for seeing the world (ontology) and understanding the nature of knowledge (epistemology). At its core, phenomenology aims to illuminate human lived experience through investigating “…what is experienced and how it is experienced” (Wertz, 2011, p. 125). Willis (1999) captures a sense of depth and reflection that is integral to a phenomenological ontology: “Phenomenology wants to slow the researcher down and hold his or her gaze on the phenomenon itself – the lived experience of some activity” (p. 95).

The term “phenomenology” has been used for centuries in philosophy (Spiegelberg, 1976). This changed in the early-20th century, with German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (Tufford & Newman, 2012). He argues that positivist views and natural sciences had neglected to take serious account of taken-for-granted assumptions and biases (Husserl, 1977), including how such approaches were applicable to deeper human purposes and concerns (Spiegelberg, 1976). Husserl aims to acknowledge consciousness as the seat from which human lived experience unfolds (Groenewald, 2004; Husserl, 1977), as people create perspectives through engaging and making sense of themselves, each other and the world (Barnacle, 2001). Husserl advocated
for an investigative approach that would enable knowledge of the world to be accessed through descriptions of everyday lived experience.

Husserl intended to aid traditional positivist science and redevelop the Cartesian approach of duality and objectivity. Instead of maintaining a traditional mind–body split (Cameron & McDermott, 2007), Husserl proposes integrating both aspects and tapping into consciousness to uncover the essences of phenomena that are directly experienced and constructed by humans (McCormick, 2011). This became known as transcendental (pure) phenomenology. To achieve this, Husserl advocates the process of bracketing for investigators/researchers. This involves uncovering and putting aside prejudices, thus bracketing them, in order to maintain an objective stance and achieve pure description of the phenomenon under investigation (Husserl, 1931). Husserl created a new epistemological approach for objectively uncovering pure consciousness (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). His philosophy was an important departure from traditional thought, as Husserl turned to subjects as opposed to objects (Spiegelberg, 1976) to study human phenomena.

**Hermeneutic phenomenology.** Husserl’s pure phenomenology was not accepted without criticism or challenge. A former student of Husserl was German philosopher Martin Heidegger (Barnacle, 2001). In his major work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) critiques the history of philosophy by arguing that the meaning of the word “being” was taken for granted. It needed to be reconceptualised to capture the fundamental importance of ontology; the nature and form of reality, and what it means to people (Heidegger, 1962; 1988). Heidegger advocates for the exploration of what it means to be within the world (Vandermause, 2012). As investigators, he argues researchers should not only describe lived experience but the meaning people attach to it.

While Husserl was focused on an objective approach to description, Heidegger pursued a social constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology that embraced subjectivity (Earle, 2010). He argues that interpretations of phenomena do not stand in objective isolation, but are embedded in language and relationships (co-construction) with others (van Manen, 1997). Heidegger disagrees with the idea of bracketing, arguing that knowledge is accessed, created and co-constructed continually within relationships and time – the past that has gone, the present that is,
and the future that’s coming (Conroy, 2003; van Manen, 1997). These dimensions can be reflected upon through the existential themes of lived corporeality (body/embodiment), lived temporality (time), lived spatiality (space), lived materiality (objects and things), and lived relationality (relationships). Heidegger concludes that knowledge is never perfect nor complete, but continually develops in new contexts, diverse subjectivities and in reference to time (van Manen, 1997; 2014). It is this perspective that is more aligned with the aims and purposes of my study, and how professional identity is defined as a social activity.

Using these ideas, a researcher and participant are in a co-constructed relationship. Together, they openly communicate to explore and reflect on lived experience and generate experiential knowledge and meaning through their interactions (Bell, 2013; Conroy, 2003; Pascal, Johnson, Dore, & Trainor, 2011). The co-construction relationship stands in contrast to approaches, such as Husserl’s, that argue inquirers should enter the world of participants to objectively gather data, analyse it in isolation and minimise their presence. Heidegger’s phenomenological approach acknowledges that my very presence would have an impact on the participant; I am a situated researcher. The act of asking participants about professional identity means they are influenced to think about it. I, as the researcher, and the participant both impact on the illumination of the phenomenon through our own respective socio-cultural backgrounds. My influence reinforces the importance of foregrounding as I must be self-aware of my background and positioning, so that I can manage it transparently and ensure the voices of participants are fully heard as active subjects.

The central aim of Heidegger’s approach is to engage with lived experience so that greater insight into the nature of being can be gained (van Manen, 1997). This includes thoroughly exploring how the experience unfolds in terms of thoughts, feelings and behaviours; what it was like; preferred ways of the experience transpiring; and, ultimately, meanings attached to the situation (Todres & Holloway, 2010; van Manen, 2014). For research, “the phenomenological researcher uses descriptions and/or interpretations of everyday human experiences (the lifeworld) as sources of qualitative evidence” (Todres & Holloway, 2010, p. 177). This is ideally suited to exploring the identities of newly qualified social workers through gathering and analysing rich descriptions of lived experience.
Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology incorporates a hermeneutic form of analysis, which philosopher Gadamer explains as the “theory and practice of interpretation” (van Manen, 1997, p. 179). He contends that the central act of interpretation is to find shared ontological meanings (Loftus & Trede, 2009). Gadamer (1975) argues “language is the middle ground in which understanding and agreement concerning the object takes place between two people” (pp. 345–346). Thus, language, backgrounds and interactions with others are the platforms from which deep meaning-making develops, and inquirers attempt to illuminate diversity, nuance and commonalities within lived experience (Hood, 2016).

Similar to phenomenology, hermeneutics is also a field of diverse thought and practice. Hermeneutic methods have been traditionally applied to the Christian Bible and other historical documents. Hermeneutics has been influenced in more recent centuries by Wilhelm Dilthey, who worked to uncover symbolic meanings within written texts (Spiegelberg, 1976; Trede & Loftus, 2010). Another significant contributor was Ricoeur, who expanded the epistemological approach by arguing that any phenomena can be interpreted (van Manen, 1997, 2014). These ideas complement Heidegger, who focused on interpreting the realities and meanings of everyday human existence while accounting for the backgrounds of those involved in the process (Laverty, 2003; Spiegelberg, 1976). Combining this particular view about hermeneutic interpretation based on exploration of lived experience, creates the paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology that my study utilises.

**Critical Social Work Theory**

Critical social work theory is also central to the research design because it complements and builds on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach in theoretical and practical ways. Developing an individual theoretical framework for research is advocated by Wertz (2011), who argues phenomenology is a diverse and evolving movement that responds to the personal journey of the researcher. Bringing multiple theories together for a study adds richness and credibility to the interpretive process (Hood, 2016). While hermeneutic phenomenology offers a way of uncovering lived experience, it does not provide adequate guidance to how wider meso and macro layers of social systems influence lived experience. This is supported by Houston and Mullan-Jensen (2012), who state: “…the role of social structure,
institutions and social settings, and their impact on the subject’s meaning-making activities, is inadequately grasped [in phenomenology] even though there is a tacit acknowledgement of the wider world” (p. 269). Critical social work theory provides a way of addressing that gap by incorporating critically reflective processes and a focus on social factors that can impact lived experience.

The development of critical social work theory has been similarly diverse as hermeneutic phenomenology. It has been informed by radical, structural and Marxist approaches that traditionally reject capitalist and economic liberalism (Payne, 2014; Pease & Nipperess, 2016). Since the 1990s, it has embraced new ideas from postmodernism, post-structuralism and feminism, amongst others, and includes critically reflective practices and theories from philosophers such as Habermas (Payne, 2014).

This development links to the history of hermeneutic research, where Habermas articulated a critical interpretive approach. Habermas aimed to facilitate critical reflection as part of interpretive analysis. He wanted people to uncover socially oppressive forces that perpetuate social problems. By developing this knowledge, people can then engage in transformative action (Loftus & Trede, 2009). He agrees with Heidegger that interpretation occurs within socio-cultural contexts, but Habermas intended to politicise the use of knowledge through critique and change (Loftus & Trede, 2009). His ideas influence modern critical social work theory by emphasising critical reflection that uncovers power, challenges language and develops action.

Briskman, Pease, and Allan (2009) explain that critical social work theory is important for maintaining a commitment to critically reflective and emancipatory practice. While there is no unified theory in this area, overall, critical social work theory explores and critiques micro, meso and macro contexts that impact lived experience and meaning, including that of social workers (Pease & Nipperess, 2016). The intent is to acknowledge diverse ways of being and various forms of knowledge (Fook, 2016). There is also a focus on uncovering and building on people’s sense of agency, to bring about social change (Payne, 2014). Analysing and challenging the outcomes of power and language and how this serves to advantage and disadvantage various groups is emphasised as part of achieving that change (Briskman et al., 2009;
Therefore, critical social work theory is interested in the interactions between individuals and social layers and working towards meaningful change within and across relationships in society. These ideas are important in current social work, where the existence of professional identity is contested and challenged.

Based on these principles, critical social work theory offers my research a more holistic way of exploring lived experience by accounting for diverse micro (individual constructions), meso (social relations) and macro (external structures) dimensions that can influence professional identity. By creating a research design based on open communication and co-construction of knowledge, social work practitioners can critically reflect to uncover diverse experiences and identify further research and dialogue for the benefit of newly qualified social workers.

Critical social work theory also provides my study with a sharper focus on the contested nature of professional identity by looking at socio-cultural and political dimensions of lived experience. There is broad concern that social workers struggle to construct and maintain a professional identity in contemporary environments. The socio-cultural discourses of neo-conservativism and managerialism create dominant voices and power relations, especially as governments influence social work definitions, practice and roles (Dickens, 2012) that do not necessarily reflect the values of the profession. Alphonse et al. (2008) encourage the profession to challenge and expand dominant Western individualism by reflecting on deeper philosophical questions, such as “what does it mean to be human?” (p.155). Bell (2012) advocates that social work’s ontological base be revisited and clarified because it needs to articulate a clearer philosophical vision, which does not perpetuate the outcomes of modernist discourses that ultimately replicate and maintain disadvantage. I argue that if social workers, including newly qualified social workers, are not clear in relation to their own professional identities, then realising the goals of the social work profession are at risk.
Theoretical Framework for My Study

My theoretical framework brings together ideas from hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory, especially those from Heidegger (1962), Habermas (1987) and Fook (2016). In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology is relevant for gaining a deeper understanding of lived experience of social work identity through a co-construction relationship. Critical social work theory reinforces that relationship through critically reflective processes to uncover diverse experiences. It also places emphasis on social systems that influence lived experience and meaning, and uses generated experiential knowledge for further research and dialogue. The theoretical framework for my study is summarised in Table 2 as a hermeneutic phenomenological and critical social work paradigm. The table is framed around ontology (view of reality) and axiology (values); epistemology (how knowledge is uncovered); and methodology (how knowledge is gathered) that form part of a research study (Della Porta & Keating, 2008; Sarantakos, 2005). The ontological dimension incorporates axiology (values) as there is a close relationship between what one believes and places value on.
Table 2

Theoretical Framework for My Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Application to the Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology and axiology (view of reality, values)</td>
<td>Relationality, subjectivity, language/discourse</td>
<td>I embrace a socially constructed reality based on relationality, subjectivity and language in constructing knowledge and meaning with newly qualified social workers about their experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect, agency, self-awareness, justice</td>
<td>Based on my social work values, I respect participants as active agents, and will be self-aware of my own position in the research through foregrounding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology (type of knowledge)</td>
<td>Diverse, temporal and dynamic experiential knowledge, epistemic justice</td>
<td>Knowledge can be formal and informal. People come to know about the world through exploration, interpretation and reflection on lived experience, including influences from socio-cultural contexts and discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogic, interpretivism, reflection, inductive</td>
<td>Findings from the research capture experiential knowledge at a particular point in time but can continue to evolve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology (how knowledge is gathered)</td>
<td>Inductive (qualitative), interpretative (phenomenological), reflective (critical)</td>
<td>Knowledge is gathered and analysed through dialogue, critical reflection and interpretation about individual and common lived experience, which unfolds within a social context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Situated researcher plus active subjects (participants) equals co-construction relationship</td>
<td>I, as the researcher, develop a respectful co-construction relationship with each participant to uncover their knowledge about the phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ontological basis of the study is social constructionism; people generate their meanings and identities of the world through personal and social interactions within it (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Sarantakos, 2005). From both hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work perspectives, reality is not constructed in isolation from people’s bodies, relationships, materials and across multiple social contexts and over time. In my study, value is placed on newly qualified social workers’ lived experience and the meaning they attach to their professional identity. Understanding their
construction of reality is based on co-construction of knowledge, where respect and agency of participants’ lived experience is central and managed through my own self-awareness, or foregrounding.

At the epistemological level, knowledge is sourced through dialogic and interpretive practices that take account of diversity and the evolving nature of knowledge over time. A focus on lived experience leads to a qualitative methodology supported by phenomenological and critical ideas that intends to generate theory and knowledge from the ground up (Alston & Bowles, 2012; Darlington & Scott, 2002).

Within a co-construction relationship, lived experience is explored, reflected and interpreted through critically reflective processes embedded into people’s exchanges. This means that the research process has meaning and impacts on the participants, and it is worth exploring and sharing those meanings, as advocated by Bell (2013). I am entwined within this collaborative process as I generate understanding of the meanings participants communicate about their lived experience, with attention paid to individual and social contexts as part of critical social work. Hood (2016) describes this as a “double act of interpretation…[Where]...researchers are people trying to make sense of people trying to make sense of their own experiences” (p.165). Once I had collected the descriptions of lived experience, my analysis balanced individual experiences and common shared themes that emerged (Houston & Mullan-Jensen, 2012; Willis, 1999). I describe this in greater detail in the methodology section of the thesis.

**Chapter Summary**

The theories of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work offer important philosophical and practical approaches for exploring lived experience of professional identity. Both theories emphasise respect and deep engagement with lived experience, through a co-constructed relationship that can enable critical reflection to unfold. Critical social work brings a sharper focus to the social context that can influence professional identity, which is crucial to consider in contemporary workplaces, where newly qualified practitioners must navigate multiple identities and discourses. Overall, the theoretical framework provides a solid foundation to capture rich
descriptions of lived experience with participants and ensure their experiential knowledge is central to the research process.
Chapter 5
Methodology and Research Process

Chapter 5 builds on the literature review and theoretical framework by discussing the qualitative methodology and research process. First to be outlined are the research aims and questions, the participant selection criteria, and the ethical considerations. Then the methodology is discussed, which includes the framing of the interviews, and how descriptions of lived experience were collated and analysed to ensure participants’ experiential knowledge was central to the process. It will be demonstrated how the qualitative methodology incorporated ideas from hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the use of field notes, which accounts for my presence in the study, as part of foregrounding.

Research Aims and Questions

The literature review indicated that the presence and development of professional identity is important in the early stages of graduates’ careers. However, how newly qualified social workers experience, foster and/or erode their professional identity is significantly underexplored within the published research, especially in Australia. This gap in the research highlighted a need to develop a theoretical framework based on hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory to holistically explore the lived experience of professional identity. Consistent with the literature review and theoretical framework, the aims of the study were to:

- Explore the lived experience of social work identity during the first 12 months post-qualification of newly qualified social workers who had completed their studies at CSU.
- Explore how social work identity is fostered and/or eroded during this time.
- Identify strategies to support newly qualified social workers during their first 12 months post-qualification period.
- Identify future directions for research and dialogue with key stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, the profession and employers.
Two research questions developed from these aims:

- How is professional social work identity experienced during the first 12 months post-qualification?
- How are the professional identities of newly qualified social workers fostered and/or eroded during this period of their first 12 months post-qualification?

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

The participants were recruited from the graduating cohort of undergraduate social work students at CSU. The social work discipline is based in Wagga Wagga, a regional inland city in the state of New South Wales, Australia. The social work discipline delivers undergraduate and postgraduate courses online and through the Wagga campus, as well as at the cities of Port Macquarie and Dubbo, which are also located in regional NSW (Bowles et al., 2015). In terms of entry-level social work programs, CSU offers a Bachelor of Social Work, and a Masters of Social Work (Professional Qualifying). In the latter program, students must have an undergraduate degree in a field related to social work. The diversity of campus locations is also reflected in the placement of academic staff, who live in rural and metropolitan areas such as Wagga Wagga, Dubbo, Port Macquarie, Sydney, Melbourne, and the north and south coasts of NSW.

In 2012, the year the participants were to graduate, there were 608 enrolled students across all the social work programs (Bowles et al., 2015). Most of these students were women (542), who were mature-aged (approximately 480), studied off-campus and were urban-based, but there was also a substantial number living in rural and regional settings across Australia (Bowles et al., 2015). As well, there were a smaller number of on-campus students, most of whom were school-leavers, who came from rural and regional communities (Bowles et al., 2015). I decided to only interview CSU undergraduate social workers because this cohort was from a diverse range of geographical locations, professional backgrounds and ages, which would provide added depth to the knowledge base regarding newly qualified social workers.

To recruit participants from CSU, the aims and questions of the study required a purposive selection method, as a target group of newly qualified social workers was required. Laverty (2003) argues recruitment should be based on involving people
from diverse backgrounds who are motivated to describe their lived experience. While a diversity of participants was desirable for my study, voluntary self-selection took precedence as part of the ethical considerations. Consequently, diversity could not be guaranteed among those who participated.

When using a phenomenological paradigm, Todres and Holloway (2010) recommend restricting the number of people interviewed to between six and 12 participants as this number should provide sufficient in-depth material for reflection. They caution against including large samples as “…depth and thoughtfulness in the analysis is sacrificed” (Todres & Holloway, 2010, p. 183). Considering this, I aimed to recruit between 10 and 25 participants. Such a number would provide a breadth of exploration as well as allow for the possibility of withdrawal that would not compromise the integrity of the study.

The main criterion for recruitment was that participants be Charles Sturt University Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) graduands at the end of 2012. Initially, I intended to seek practitioners who had social work-designated positions and were in their “first year of practice”, which reflected the research in the wider literature. However, after further reading and during the recruitment phase, I modified the criteria because I thought it might deter people in generic-titled positions or others who may not yet be employed from participating in the study. Thus, I later replaced the phrase “first year of practice” in the recruitment documentation with the more generic term “12 months post-qualification” to ensure diverse experiences of employment and job-seeking were included.

I used several strategies to recruit participants from classes with whom I did not have current teaching responsibilities. First, I introduced the project to distance (off-campus) students during an intensive week of face-to-face learning, known as residential school, in September 2012. I explained the project and said that I would provide further details through online portals over the coming weeks. This recruitment strategy led to seven participants joining the study. Next, I placed an advertisement (see Appendix A) on the CSU social work and social welfare student website and three online subject sites of final-year students who were studying on-campus and off-campus. Three participants responded to the advertisement. Finally, a senior colleague liaised with CSU’s administration staff to provide me with the 2012
graduand list, which I then used to email students. A further seven participants responded to the graduand email. Through these activities, a total of 17 people self-selected to join the study. I will outline details about individual and group characteristics in the next chapter where an overview of the participants is provided.

**Ethical Considerations**

I gained ethics approval from the CSU School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee in 2012. To build an ethically co-constructed relationship based on trust and respect, I had to address a range of ethical dimensions including voluntary and informed consent; confidentiality; handling previous/future relationships; and dealing with potential discomfort.

Prospective participants were given an information package that included an information sheet, consent form (see Appendix A) and draft interview schedules. I had to be transparent about the level of participation requested as the three interviews over the course of a year required a long-term commitment. I further reinforced this point at the commencement of the interviewing phase, when I revisited the aims and context of the study with each participant. The information sheet emphasised that participants could withdraw without penalty at any time, which was particularly important as there were multiple interviews.

Confidentiality issues included the storage of documents, the de-identification of materials and the handling of sensitive information. First, all materials associated with the study were handled through locked filing systems and password-protected documents. Next, transcripts and associated materials were de-identified, including field notes and findings.

As participants had graduated from CSU, there may have been perceptions regarding the expectation to participate, especially as I had previous teaching relationships with some of them. Thus, self-selection to be involved in the study was important, and was reinforced in the documentation. My role as a research student was also clearly identified on the information sheet and consent form. The interviews began after the participants had completed their formal study, so there were no current academic–student relationships. Several participants undertook postgraduate study with CSU during the data collection period, but I had no academic association with them.
In terms of potential discomfort, I considered what to do if participants were experiencing a stressful or poor first year. As they had only recently graduated, there was a risk that the participants could develop a perception that I would provide additional support like they received when they were at CSU. The information sheet importantly defined the boundaries and provided details of support contacts if they were needed. A participant support document (see Appendix A) was supplied with details on how discomfort would be managed and contacts for support.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology framed the process of gathering knowledge. The methodology did not sit in isolation but was consistent with the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the theoretical framework; that is, it drew from both hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work theory.

Gathering knowledge centred on the co-construction relationship between each participant and me; both of us are inextricably linked to the emerging stories because “Interpretation is an ongoing and evolving task. It is an interactive act because persons form an integral part of a communal world and do not exist as separate entities; the world and the individual co-constitute meanings or understandings” (Conroy, 2003, p. 9). This did not mean I imposed my views and ideas onto participants. I engaged in foregrounding processes to understand and account for my use of self, and how I impacted on the relationship, conversations and analysis. This was so I could remain open to learning from the lived experience of the participants. It also meant that I had to build a trusting relationship with participants based on a curious attitude to draw out and honour their experiential knowledge and check that my reflective analysis captured what they intended. Bell (2013) argues it is ethically and conceptually important for researchers to also explore what the research process means to participants. This recognises that the research process is based on a subjective engagement that can have transformative impacts on all parties involved.

Collecting and analysing lived experience is based on “…gathering examples of everyday experiences, describing them and reflecting on them” (Todres & Holloway, 2010, pp. 177–8). Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to understand the meaning of being (Laverty, 2003), which includes the nature of phenomena that one directly
experiences as part of existence. Any study is structured around posing questions such as: “Have you had this kind of experience, and if so, how did it occur for you and what was it like for you” (Todres & Holloway, 2010, p. 183)? These types of questions informed my methods for gathering descriptions of lived experience. Critical social work theory complemented the phenomenological approach by honouring lived experience, acknowledging the social context in which lived experience occurred, and incorporating critical reflection into the co-construction relationship so participants could experience deeper reflection on their professional identity.

**Method: Collecting rich descriptions of lived experience.** I conducted semi-structured interviews, at three different times during the first 12 months post-qualification period. It was necessary to do multiple interviews to capture the richness and shifts in professional identity over the first year, rather than a one-off snapshot, which was more common in the literature. It was also beneficial to do this as part of a critically reflective process because I would be able to develop an understanding of each participant as we talked about their past, present and future during the three interviews and, in turn, they could critically reflect on their experiences over time. I decided to use a semi-structured approach to explore particular areas of inquiry but remained open to where participants wanted to direct conversations. The interviews were developed (see Appendix B) to reflect the theoretical framework, literature review, and definition of professional identity that was based on the shared dimensions of *being, knowing/thinking* and *doing*. The interviews were structured around the participants discussing their lived experience of professional identity, including critical reflection on individual and social dimensions of how identity is fostered and/or eroded.

The time and location of all interviews was negotiated with each participant, based on their availability, preference for location, and travel. Due to the in-depth qualitative nature of the study I aimed for face-to-face interviews wherever possible. Most interviews were completed in person, either in the participants’ homes or at their workplaces (Table 3). There were several occasions where the interview was split between locations due to time factors or work. For example, during a second interview, a participant was called to a work emergency. We stopped the interview
and resumed it later in their home at the request of the participant, which meant half of the interview occurred at their workplace and half at their home. In another instance, most of an interview was conducted in person, and then finished via phone. In terms of length, across the whole year, most interviews averaged 2 to 2.5 hours. The shortest interview (without interruptions) was one hour during the first interview phase, and the longest was 3 hours and 20 minutes, during the second interview phase.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ homes</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ workplaces</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public place</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context of the first interview. The first interview phase began in November 2012, which was at the point of qualification. Interviews for this phase were concluded in February 2013. The main purpose of the first interview was to lay the foundations of the co-construction relationship. I focused on establishing rapport and trust by exploring the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants, including their personal and professional journey into social work, demographics and employment arrangements. A central interview question was asking the participants to rate confidence in their social work identity, on a scale of 1 to 10. Their individual number prompted associated questions about lived experience, such as why they rated themselves that way, and what fostered and/or eroded their professional identity. The scale was not a quantitative scale designed to objectively measure their experience. It was posed as a qualitative question to prompt subjective thinking and critical reflection about confidence in identity. Overall, my intent was to get to know the
participants, especially around their past, present and thoughts about their future and professional identity.

**Context of the second interview.** The second interview phase began midway through the post-qualification period. Interviews took place in May 2013 and finished in September 2013. I interviewed most participants in a similar order so that there would be a six-month interval between each interview, although there was some variation with several participants due to their availability. The intention of the second interview was for participants to openly reflect on the previous six months through being asked questions about what had happened, changed and/or developed for them. I asked this as an open question so participants could direct the conversation as much as possible. This also informed revisiting what it means to be, know/think and do as social worker. To explore lived experience of identity in further detail, the scale question was used again so that participants could describe their various experiences that related to fostering and eroding identity. After asking each participant what they would rate their confidence as, and why, we would then explore the rating from their previous interview and reflect on the differences and/or similarities between the scores.

**Context of the final interview.** The final interviews occurred at the end of the initial post-qualification period, and took place between November 2013 and February 2014. The final interview included similar dynamics and questioning to the second interview, but this time the participants also reflected on the entire first year and terminating the research relationship. Participants were given the option to bring an artefact that represented their journey, as a way of adding depth to the reflective experience of telling their story. They could bring along an object that may already be part of their lives, or something that prompted further reflection on their journey and professional identity. The last section of the interview was tailored to ask specifically about advice they would give to key stakeholders, including themselves, other newly qualified social workers, students, educators, the profession and employers. This encouraged reflection on their own journey while honouring their experiential knowledge as a source of learning for others.
Method: Analysis of participants’ lived experience. The analytical process was guided by two core principles – deep immersion, and balancing the whole and parts of experiences. First, it was necessary to develop a deep familiarity with the experiences expressed by each participant through immersion and reflection upon stories as they took place (McCormick, 2011; Sharkey, 2001). Second, Todres and Holloway (2010) indicate phenomenological work is not a typical qualitative approach that dissects words, lines and sections but is centred on moving back and forth between the whole text and sections to garner greater meaning. This is supported by van Manen (1997), who argues for a balancing act between parts and the whole. To do this, I paid attention to the journey of the individual and commonalities that were shared amongst participants, as well as differences, to honour diversity. Analysis was a continual process of reading, reflecting and re-reading within and between descriptions of lived experience to develop emerging themes and check their accuracy with participants as part of the co-construction relationship.

Thematic analysis was an appropriate method to realise the methodological principles. Both are focused on the development of themes, balancing parts and the whole within descriptions of lived experience, and capturing diversity within individual and collective experiences. Thematic analysis provides flexibility and a fluid iterative process to unfold to a point of reaching an acceptable understanding of the themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six adaptable phases of thematic analysis: familiarity with data, coding, collating themes, reflecting on themes, refining themes and the writing process. While this can be implemented as a linear approach, in phenomenological work, greater flexibility is called for. Saldaña (2013) argues that many qualitative studies will employ a cyclical approach to analysis as opposed to a linear one. In my study, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) phases were used for providing a broad structure for analysis, as new understanding and continual reflection took place between parts and the whole.

Initial note-taking. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for interpretive analysis. Phenomenological researchers are generally encouraged to transcribe materials themselves to aid with deep immersion into the rich descriptions
of lived experience (van Manen, 1997). However, as a part-time student, I found it was not feasible to transcribe all of the in-depth interviews. Accordingly, the interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and a professional transcription service, both of whom signed confidentiality agreements.

The first phase of thematic analysis involved becoming deeply familiar with the content through reading and noting initial ideas, which is also referred to as pre-coding (Saldaña, 2013). I undertook initial note-taking throughout the interview phases. When I received each transcript, I reviewed it as soon as possible for any spelling errors and to ensure that the emotion and language had been accurately captured such as laughter and pauses. Reading the transcripts and listening to the audio led to the development of initial thoughts that could be sent to the participants before their next interview. I created a template to collate these initial thoughts (Table 4). Within the template, I paraphrased descriptions and drew out key quotes to highlight the participants’ experiences of identity. To balance moving between parts and the whole, the notes were completed by collating a holistic summary on professional identity for each participant at the top of the template.

Table 4

*Template for Initial Note-Taking*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Content</th>
<th>Holistic Summary: What Is the Dominant Message Regarding Identity?</th>
<th>Participant Contribution/Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Section</td>
<td>Summary of Each Section: What Are the Main Messages Here?</td>
<td>Researcher Annotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key Phrases:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial Thoughts (memo):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transcript Excerpts:

The transcript and notes were forwarded to the participant for their records and to invite comment on whether I understood their experiences at that point in time.
**Topic coding.** Coding can be controversial in phenomenological work as rich detail can be lost if lived experience is dissected (Saldaña, 2013). However, van Manen (1997) describes “holistic…selective…. [and] line-by-line” (pp. 92–93) approaches for phenomenological analysis that mirror coding processes. The intent is to remain focused on being reflective and drawing out the greater meanings in the descriptions.

For my study, the coding phase fully began after the completion of all interviews. A three-staged approach was taken – topic coding, analytic coding and thematic coding (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Coding process.

As the figure shows, it was not a strict linear process, which is supported by Richards (2009), who argues there are intertwined analytical processes when using various types of coding. The purpose of all coding phases is to engage in deeper reflection on lived experience and meaning to group notes and thoughts into codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; van Manen, 1997).

For topic coding, I reviewed my initial notes, listened to the interviews and did multiple readings of the transcripts for each participant. This was so I could
inductively develop topic codes that reflected the subjects of conversations within the interviews. As a situated researcher, I also included my pre-constructed codes informed by the theoretical framework, definition of professional identity and interview schedules (Table 5). This was not designed to be deductive but to reflect the topics of conversation that occurred in the semi-structured interviews. All content was reflected upon for deeper meaning and re-coded as ideas and themes emerged. For example, the topic codes of “fostering identity” and “erosion of identity” were pre-constructed. However, as I coded, re-coded and developed themes it was no longer necessary to incorporate the original code as all material had been collated across various themes.

Table 5

*Approach to Topic Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of Code</th>
<th>Application to My Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive/topic (Richards, 2009) coding</td>
<td>Open coding that inductively captures the various topics throughout the whole interview</td>
<td>What are the topics/subjects of conversation throughout?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Within my initial notes, what topics of conversation are present?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-constructed codes</td>
<td>From the theoretical framework, definition of professional identity and interview schedule</td>
<td>Motivations to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impacts of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being, knowing/thinking, doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being a newly qualified social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Setting context (demographics and attributes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influences upon identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fostering/erosion of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advice for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived body, lived time, lived space, lived relations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All transcripts were uploaded into a software program called NVIVO for topic coding. I used the node and memo functions to create codes and undertake reflective writing as part of the analysis process. It was important to preserve the chronological...
order of the interviews and to capture shifts over time in the data. When I uploaded the interview files, they were each labelled separately with the name of the participant and phase of interview (that is, name – first interview, name – second interview, name – third interview). This ensured that whenever I reviewed a code, all participant responses were listed in chronological order, which allowed me to systematically review what a participant said and when.

I thoroughly reviewed the transcripts of each individual participant separately and in chronological order – coding their first interview, then the second and then the final one respectively. The process reflected balancing the whole and parts as each individual was considered as a whole, and the parts were coded into topic codes. It was also iterative as I developed new topic codes and had to read and re-read transcripts to code all content.

As topic coding took place, the participant journey was summarised as part of developing a holistic picture of each person (see Appendix E). Within each summary, a table was developed to track key information from each interview phase such as identity scales, changes and important quotes. My approach was inspired by Saldaña (2013) who emphasises utilising a tool that can capture change over time. Once completed, the summary was forwarded to each participant for feedback. All participants confirmed that they were satisfied with what I wrote.

Reflective analytical writing was an integral part of the coding process. For every code, I created and attached a memo and wrote about the content of the code. I made sure to note any changes I made to each code over time as I reviewed and reflected upon them continually. The following subheadings were used in the memos:

- Description
- Title
- Re-coded to (if appropriate)
- Sub-codes (if any)
- What is the whole story of this code (whole)?
- What are the participants’ stories (parts) – first interview
- What are the participants’ stories (parts) – second interview
- What are the participants’ stories (parts) – final interview
To ensure I was consistent with my methodological approach, I inductively developed the “story” of the code by reflecting on each participant’s comments (parts) and how they contributed to the whole. My intention was to generate the whole story from the parts. For some codes, this included counting how many participants commented on a particular experience so that a sense of commonalities across the group that contributed to the whole story could be collected. However, I always noted individual variation and nuance to honour diverse experiences. Finally, I was able to analyse longitudinal dimensions because the interviews were labelled according to their phase. I reflected on and drew out when participants’ experiences occurred and how they changed over time. At the end of topic coding, I had developed 160 original topic codes (see Appendix C).

**Analytic coding.** Analytic coding is the connection between the topic codes and themes. While topic coding involves identifying subjects of conversation, analytic coding involves grouping similar topic codes together that can later be refined into themes (Richards, 2009). I reviewed the content of all topic codes to reflect on the following questions: What is going on here? What is the story of this topic code? What commonalities exist between these topic codes? Reflection like this leads to reviewing and grouping common topic codes into emerging categories that capture the meaning of the subject (Richards, 2009). Once again, the process was not strictly linear but cyclical as each phase impacted on the other. During the topic-coding phase, I became increasingly aware of tentative categories. I noticed patterns between codes, and as I developed categories, I reflected on and re-developed topic codes. Thirty analytic codes emerged from this process (see Appendix C).

**Thematic coding.** I reflected on the codes and emerging categories to consider patterns that could be further collapsed into core themes (see Appendix C). Eight central themes emerged from the recursive process, which involved ongoing reflection and writing within and across codes. Thematic coding was conducted until reflective analysis could reach a point of fore-understanding and could be written up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Todres & Holloway, 2010). After writing the draft findings, I returned to NVivo and used a report function to identify and review the five most prevalent topic codes of each individual participant from each of their interviews. By “prevalent”, I mean the most often discussed topics. I wanted to compare their whole
summaries and vignettes against those codes to further check accuracy and ensure nuance was captured in participants’ stories. In doing this, I intended to add weight to the credibility of the findings. I added the five most prevalent topic codes to each participant’s table in their whole summary (see Appendix E).

Next, it was important to confirm commonalities within the group from each interview phase. To do this, I wrote at the end of each individual’s interview my main interpretation of what had occurred for them during that period (see Appendix E). I collated these interpretations and grouped them into their respective interview phases for further analysis and writing up. I also cross-checked and developed this analysis by incorporating the five most prevalent thematic codes across each phase of interviewing.

Based on theoretical framework, a complete understanding of a phenomenon is never sought or believed to be achievable, thus rendering theoretical saturation irrelevant (van Manen, 1997). Instead, the aim is to uncover rich descriptions of lived experience to reach a fuller realisation of human existence that is based on current information (fore-understanding) and with the understanding that it will continue to develop in the future (Gadamer, 1975; van Manen, 1997). Therefore, the themes I present in the latter part of the thesis aim to provide an acceptable level of understanding rather than being the only interpretation or a singular truth. The themes are used as a basis for illuminating common and diverse, nuanced experiences, as well as opening avenues for further research and dialogue as part of the study aims.

To achieve an acceptable level of understanding, two dimensions were important – presenting the themes in an accessible manner for audiences and the co-construction relationship. For accessibility, I was guided by Vandermause’s (2012) statement about using “exemplar quotations that make sense to the reader” (p. 306). Also, due to the in-depth nature of the themes, I incorporate the discussion with each set of findings, rather than at the very end of a chapter or in a separate section in order to maintain flow and readability.

Within the co-construction relationship, materials and themes were presented to participants throughout the process, which has already been described. Once initial themes were generated, participants were given the opportunity to review these and
provide comment again through a follow-up focus group in December 2014 (see Appendix B). I offered participants a focus group session or an opportunity to catch up individually at a time that suited their needs. For the focus group, three participants attended a teleconference and stated they were satisfied with the generated themes. I undertook individual sessions with three other participants, who also stated they were satisfied with the generated themes.

**Foregrounding through Field Notes**

As part of the theoretical framework, it was important to be aware of my experiences, thoughts and beliefs in relation to the phenomenon to keep participants’ experiential knowledge the central focus of the study. Laverty (2003) explains the importance of being continually reflective: “The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched” (p. 17). This does not mean my experiences and views were analysed in the process or compared to participants. As a situated researcher, I had to be transparent about the use of self (influences) so I could manage these and remain focused on drawing out and illuminating the lived experience of participants from the ground up.

To undertake foregrounding, I maintained field notes. Groenewald (2004) describes four types of field notes that were useful when I was developing my own framework. First, observational notes are centred on recalling what happened, based on one’s senses. This contextualises the event by capturing who, what, where and when, with reference to what was seen, heard and any other relevant sensory aspects. Second, the theoretical approach allows for general reflection on the experience, including why the event took place. Next, methodological notes can be centred on making connections to one’s own background and experience. Finally, analytical notes include making summaries at the end of events (Groenewald, 2004). To incorporate these aspects, I drew on critical social work theory to design a three-staged field note template (see Appendix D), which was based on description, reflective analysis (deconstruction) and reconstruction (theorising). This method incorporated Groenewald’s (2004) four types of notes as follows: description of the event (observational), reflection on the event (theoretical) and general theorising (methodological and analytical).
Field notes were taken after every interview and any contact with participants that involved conversing about lived experience related to the study. At times the notes linked to the initial note-taking phase of data analysis as it was inevitable to reflect upon the content of the exchanges. However, the field notes were not used as an analysis method; they were used for tracing my presence within the research process. The notes were an important part of getting thoughts “out of my head” immediately after the exchange so that I could reflect on what happened. I was able to become more aware of what I was thinking during interviews and analysis.

Chapter Summary

In outlining how the study was undertaken, consideration was given to its ethical dimensions, especially informed consent, as the participants were invited to undertake multiple interviews across a 12-month period. The methodology was informed by the theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical social work, which emphasises deep immersion into the lived experience of participants. The philosophical underpinnings of the framework guided me to undertake semi-structured interviews and to ensuring interpretation and analysis of participants’ stories was grounded in the whole and parts of each participant’s journey. Thematic analysis provided a useful framework for generating themes in an inductive manner, and further checking was done by reflecting on the most prevalent topic and thematic codes to draw out patterns from the participants’ experiences.
Chapter 6
Overview of Participants

Having described the background and context of my research, this chapter introduces the participants and outlines their individual story and their characteristics. The first half of the chapter provides a vignette of each person based on the holistic summary of their journey (see Appendix E). The vignettes introduce and pay tribute to the whole person. The second part of the chapter focuses on the group of participants. It details the demographic and employment information that emerged from their individual stories and setting context form (see Appendix B).

Vignettes

The vignettes are ordered according to location, with small rural and regional locations first, then large rural centres and finally metropolitan. The participants were dispersed across the states of Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australian and Northern Territory. There was no single location with more than two participants. To classify the location of participants, I used the rural, remote and metropolitan area classification system (AIHW, n.d). For most of the year, seven participants lived in smaller/other rural centres, six lived in large rural centres, and four lived in capital cities. Thus, the majority of participants (13) lived in rural and regional locations, which remained largely consistent throughout the year, despite several participants moving. There was no substantial shift in the type of location when the participants moved. While most CSU social work students are located in urban regions, it is noteworthy that most participants who self-selected to be in this study were located in non-metropolitan areas.

All 17 participants completed the series of three interviews. In the final interview, participants were given the opportunity to bring an artefact which captured their journey. Thirteen participants discussed an artefact, some of which were physical objects that, with permission, I photographed and have included with each vignette below. For ethical reasons, some details and images are not included in order to maintain confidentiality. Each participant has a pseudonym, with the exception of Cass, who gave written permission for her name to be included as part of honouring her whole identity.
Isabella was a part-time project officer in a domestic violence program and oversaw a relationship education program in high schools. She had been working in these roles during study and continued working in them after having completed her degree.

It took some time for Isabella to become comfortable with her social work identity. In some ways, she believed she had to earn it when comparing herself to experienced practitioners. Over time Isabella settled into her professional identity and became increasingly confident about expressing it. Throughout the year, Isabella reflected on the close relationship between personal and professional aspects of self. In particular, Isabella described personal growth and development as a significant part of her journey and building her social work identity. She overcame personal fears to manage conflict and incorporated this into her professional work. Much of this was achieved through her commitment to change and high-quality external supervision that involved a lot of in-depth reflection. By the end of the year, Isabella moved into a program management role, which would be for a short period, and was continuing to assess her career options as part of maintaining her quality of life. To capture her 12-month journey, Isabella (final interview) shared several artefacts that reflected physical, social, ideological and spiritual tools that enabled her to “be in the world”.

Table 6
Isabella

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Small (other) rural area</td>
<td>Several personal artefacts (Figure 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Turkish/Kurdish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. Isabella’s artefacts (several personal artefacts).

- Statue (top left corner):
  
  ... [very much a spiritual object and...that personal growth and the spiritual growth...that's a bit like the guiding light you know... if I’m in the right place there, which this [artefact] reminds me of, then I’m in the right place everywhere else I need to be.

- Swan (top right corner):
  
  ...it’s a holder of things and you can... I don’t know, I can metaphorically put whatever I need to do. I hold my tools, I hold my experience, I hold my wisdom, I hold my social connections, I hold everything my creativity in there.

- Card one (front, left):
  
  ...she has a ring of fire around her and that’s all sorts of possibilities and magic and power within, empowering her to basically to go and do what she needs to do...and she has various artefacts and things and wands and tools and ritual objects in there so that’s a kind of how I feel about that.

- Card two (front, centre):
  
  ...women who are building a wall together, and they’re sharing the work so that’s very much a building process and how it’s dependent on cooperation and sharing, so it’s very much how it’s been where I’ve been working.
Card three (front, right):

...having a higher purpose to me, and that being focused and always maintaining that – well, to me it's a spirituality but I'll just call it a higher purpose, and certainly in terms of my workplace practice, that's where this is like how we are always above everything we do; we're always maintaining a feminist practice of empowering. (Isabella)

These artefacts depict multilayered personal and professional experiences. Isabella emphasised being driven by her spirituality to grow and develop aspects of self that made her a better person and social worker. Her journey was not a solo one; it was influenced by the people Isabella worked with and feminist principles in her organisation.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geraldine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geraldine had over 25 years of experience in the human services sector, making her one of the most experienced participants in the study. For the previous six-and-a-half years, she had been a part-time program manager for a domestic violence program.

Geraldine described adjusting to and settling into her new social work identity over the course of the year. Despite her background, Geraldine said she had never experienced a professional identity before and found that the shared language and sense of membership in social work fostered her identity. Geraldine also found it was meaningful to be recognised and valued as a social worker by colleagues and friends throughout the year. While the year was rewarding overall, there were some low points within organisational relationships, including management. During this time, Geraldine found it was important to keep working on her growth and development, and her professional self-care. Geraldine’s artefact was a package provided during a self-care lecture in her final year of study. It contained a range of items connecting to various parts of her experiences, and university study.
...but I think I’ll actually talk about the little bag, and I still have it; it’s in my drawer in my room, and why is it important? Because it reminds me of that time. It is an artefact now, stale Minty and all...And it reminded me that there were some really important messages in that little spiel about looking after yourself and all that. But there was also humour in it, and they had a good sense of humour. And I do remember the whole group actually starting to laugh afterwards. And that actually has stayed with me… (Geraldine, final interview)

We talked about this package at each of the interviews. It reflected many dimensions of her experiences but also the importance of her social work identity during her study period. Going on to campus for lectures and being amongst other social work students was a meaningful exchange that remained with Geraldine in her professional life as a qualified social worker. The package was also a reminder to her to be constantly vigilant about one’s professional self-care and how humour can be an important part of revitalising oneself.

Figure 4. Geraldine’s artefact (self-care package).
Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Michael</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Michael had over 10 years of experience in the human services sector and has a social science/welfare degree. At the start of interviewing, he was a full-time hospital social worker, a role he had been working in for over 18 months.

Similar to Isabella, Michael found his personal growth and development to be a fundamental theme of his journey. In his case, the birth of his first child prompted Michael to reassess and develop his self-awareness and sense of being as a social worker. He described himself as a thinker and a doer, but had to work on being in the moment and with his emotions. He accessed high-quality external supervision, which was a crucial part of reflecting and facilitating change. By the end of the interviewing phase of the study, Michael was undertaking postgraduate study in psychology to assist with entering private practice in the future. He was committed to keeping his social work identity, but believed he needed psychology training to be able to work with chronic health and addiction issues in his remote area. Michael’s artefact was a photo of his son, who had been a major catalyst for change and growth.

*That is what I’ve looked at [the photo] for the last 12 months, and now I’ve got one on the computer...half of the reason I’m being better at who I am now is because of that little moment happening; and he’s a charmer; he’s brilliant; and he’s lovely, and it’s probably the only treasure that I’ve got that I really would consider if I lost that, then anything else I could lose I’d be fine. It wouldn’t matter.* (Michael, final interview)

This story reinforced how personal aspects of life can prompt major changes in the professional domain. Michael became acutely aware of what he needed to work on as a parent and how it also benefited him as a professional social worker.
Gary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for most of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Small (other) rural centre</td>
<td>Scales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After study, Gary accepted a position in a new graduate program with a government agency. However, after further reflection on his career goals, he accepted a role as a social worker in a statutory social security department (Centrelink) in a remote area. Gary chose this because he wanted a more challenging experience. Gary described a very positive induction process that was comprehensive and met his needs. He also had regular access to managers and other social workers, including through online communication systems. This kind of access was a crucial part of his orientation and for ongoing support in a remote area. He appreciated being able to really connect with other social workers for reflecting on his own professional identity and practice.

Throughout the year, Gary was very motivated to clarify and build on his perceptions of social work. In his Centrelink role, Gary consistently reminded himself that he is there for clients, not himself or others. This helped him to navigate his thinking and actions, especially in a bureaucratic and managerial environment. At a personal level, he reflected on long-term plans of living in a remote area that was geographically distinct from his previous home. The weather was much hotter and he missed being close to family and friends. Nonetheless, he embraced new challenges and had a very rewarding experience which resulted in developing greater confidence over time.

Gary’s artefact was a scale depicting work-life balance. He used this as a reflective tool throughout his journey.

_I have this picture in my mind of a set of scales where I have my work on one side of the scale and my lifestyle on the other. At times, they’re at even, but sometimes the work will be more important to me than the workplace, rather than home. But I just don’t want the scales tilted too far to one side that my life becomes unbalanced so to speak._ (Gary, final interview)

Gary used this imagery to reflect on his own personal/professional life, and how to maintain a healthy balance. The scales depict the fluidity of how aspects of life move...
up and down, and while this is necessary at times, one must also be acutely aware of when the balance is out of place. It also reflects his achievement in being able to maintain a good work–life balance throughout the year.

Table 10

Vivienne

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Small (other) rural centre</td>
<td>Butterfly figure and a stress ball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vivienne had 25 years of experience in the human services sector, like Geraldine. For the past six years, she had been a part-time family and carer support worker in the mental health sector. Vivienne was keen to gain a position that would fully utilise her social work qualification, but in her small rural area, job availability was limited. Later in the year, Vivienne gained a secondment and then a full-time role in adult mental health services. Vivienne enjoyed working within her multidisciplinary setting, which included working with several other social workers. She observed their practice and appreciated learning from them.

Additional support during her orientation was found to be an important mechanism during her transition and adjustment to the role. Throughout her journey, Vivienne emphasised the importance of organisational and external support as part of professional self-care. Vivienne regularly talked about the importance of being personally responsible for looking after herself as well as organisations being supportive by providing a stable structure for day-to-day work. To capture this, Vivienne shared two artefacts, a butterfly and a stress ball.

[The butterfly represents how] I felt very contained and like I had to contain a lot, and now I have more autonomy.

...the stress ball is for those times when I find it challenging; I just hold the ball in one hand and speak or do whatever I have to do with the other. (Vivienne, final interview)
The butterfly reflected how Vivienne was finally able to emerge from “her cocoon and spread her wings and fly” as a social worker. The stress ball represented how she regularly faced challenges and needed to be supported within her work.

Table 11

| Cass |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age Range | Gender | Ethnicity | Location | Artefact |
| 40s | Female | White Australian | Small rural centre | Smurfette (Character from The Smurfs) |

After study, Cass gained a short-term secondment in a hospital setting. This was her first social work job and professional experience in the human services field. Her previous work had been in the health sector, in a medical position. While Cass was excited about her new social work role, she said that she needed to build her confidence, self-esteem and professional identity. When the contract ended, Cass returned to a previous position in the health sector. She experienced several difficult months searching for a social work position. Cass accepted a contract secondment role as a sexual assault counsellor, and some more hospital contract work; she was keen to take up opportunities and gain as much experience as possible. By the end of the interviewing phase of the study, Cass was motivated to gain a permanent position in the sexual assault services area as it was a very rewarding role.

A defining feature of Cass’s year was experiencing significant personal and professional growth and development while being supported in a nurturing environment. To describe her professional identity and journey of development, Cass chose Smurfette, a character from The Smurfs.

...I always wanted to be like Smurfette...Because she was so right. She had all these... this group of...and I must go back and visit the cartoons because I don’t know if my perspective as an adult on her now is the same as when I was a kid, but she just always seemed to be in so control of herself, and she had all these brothers around her, and she was the only girl in the village, but she was able to – what’s the word I am trying to think of? Not control everyone, but establish herself as a female in amongst all of these boys and she had her own Smurfette
Cass’s artefact depicted how she progressively became more confident over time and experienced a significant personal and professional transformation that she never expected to occur. While her initial transition into the field was bumpy, Cass settled in, became comfortable with her professional identity, and developed her confidence and abilities over the course of the year, which can be attributed to her individual effort and consistent support.

### Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Australian Aboriginal</td>
<td>Small rural centre</td>
<td>Dolphin figurine (Figure 5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Claire entered social work after many years working in the creative industries. After study, Claire gained a short-term contract with a mental health inpatient unit that later became a full-time position. Claire described experiencing job satisfaction over the year, especially within her supportive and like-minded team, where she was the only social worker. After several months of transition and adjustment into the organisational culture, and orientation, Claire described being more confident in her professional identity, role and organisation. Claire said she was able to better articulate what it means to be a social worker. Over the whole year, significant personal and professional events prompted further growth and development, including discovering what professional self-care really meant to her. This led to more satisfying, rewarding and sustainable practice. To describe her whole journey, Claire used a dolphin figurine.
...he has become the symbol of my social work career...Yeah, emotions are the ocean to me; that’s the metaphor and the only way to navigate it is to become a native in that environment...I’m swimming much more strongly...I’ve been under a few times and unable to get out...Still coming up for air... [Now I’m] swimming more playfully rather than effort. (Claire, final interview)

Her metaphor depicts how the first year can include “waves that throw you around”. As one learns to be comfortable in the ocean, they become a stronger swimmer who can handle the waves and enjoy the journey. Claire’s artefact captures the significant growth and development she experienced over the course of the year. When Claire started, she had an idea of what being a social worker could mean but through time, experience and critical reflection, she was able to better articulate it and develop her professional identity.

Table 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White New Zealand/Australian</td>
<td>Large rural centre</td>
<td>The Lorax (Character from the Dr Seuss book)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

James came to social work after working many years in the hospitality industry. James gained a full-time hospital social work role immediately after his final field placement. James experienced a positive first year, particularly as a result of his
commitment to learning and having a very supportive social work team and manager. A major achievement was clarifying his distinct professional identity in the hospital. James came to understand what his social work role was and the value it could have in the hospital, especially within a multidisciplinary setting and dominant medical context. After about nine months, James described fully adjusting to his full-time position after he had been previously working casual and shift work. James was motivated to stay in his current role and continue experiencing growth and development. He described the hospital as an ideal place for opportunities to move into new areas over time. When reflecting on his whole journey, James drew from a key quote in one of his favourite books; Dr Seuss’s *The Lorax:*

> Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. I’ve always felt that I need to go and help people and to assist and empower people but unless you do something about it and being a social worker is my way of doing something about it...I think I’ve been able to do something about it...I’ve had some really good outcomes. (James, final interview)

This reflected James’s sense of being as a social worker; he framed professional identity around a desire to make positive change. In his first year post-qualification, this quote embodied the positive change that James could achieve in his hospital social work role, especially as he became increasingly confident over the year.

**Table 14**

*Damon*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Large rural centre</td>
<td>Night-Wing (Character from the <em>Batman</em> series)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During study, Damon was employed on a contract and casual basis in the disability sector, but when he finished, he was motivated to find a job that would fully utilise his social work qualification. Damon described job seeking as a major and unexpected challenge that became an important learning experience during the year.
Most of the feedback he received was that employers wanted someone with experience.

Just after the second interview, Damon gained a permanent full-time position as a youth care coordinator in a non-government organisation (NGO). Damon moved to another large rural centre for this job. He enjoyed his new position, where he was the only social worker in the team. His manager encouraged him to express his social work identity, which helped him to explore it within his work. He reflected on what made him distinct to others, especially his colleagues, who were mostly psychologists. He noticed important differences in how they saw the world and the people they worked with. Damon believed that with more time and experience, he would grow and become more confident in his role as a social worker. Damon’s artefact was the comic character, Night-Wing, from the *Batman* series:

*I think it’s the only character that, not only, but one of the only ones that has sort of gone from… that changes in comics. Most of them stay the same; they never grow up. Whereas he’s gone from a kid to an adult and just that sort of…I don’t know if it’s a transformation, but it’s like this isn’t working for me anymore[so] I’m going to do this.* (Damon, final interview)

This character represented commitment and helping qualities, and is one of the few characters that experiences significant change, growth and development in the series. Damon described how this reflected his personal journey of developing professional maturity as a young adult. By the end of the year, he was looking forward to the future, where he could gain more experience and confidence in his social work practice.

Table 15

*Rueben*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African/Australian</td>
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<td>Picture of people walking together (Figure 6)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Rueben had been working in a government organisation for several years during his social work studies. After completing his studies, he became a full-time worker occupying two positions: his substantive position was as a case manager; he also had a secondment in a behaviour support role.

Rueben described how it took time to clarify what his social work qualification meant in his role. He described a strong sense of responsibility to live up to social work’s values and ethics. He experienced growth in his professional identity and job satisfaction over the year, especially as he handled complex cases earlier than anticipated. He received consistent positive feedback from various sources, which fostered his confidence and sense of social work identity. Rueben described it was an ongoing challenge to balance client needs with neo-conservative and managerial discourses that limit access to resources. By the end of the year, Rueben was also doing casual teaching in the tertiary sector as well as undertaking postgraduate study. Rueben’s artefact was a picture of three people walking together.

![Figure 6. Rueben’s artefact (picture of people walking together).](image)

*I have chosen this one specifically to illustrate my journey as new grad social worker that you will never walk alone in the long journey. Also, within the journey, I was expected to do different tasks all at once which drew on my multi-tasking skills, time management and attention to detail. Although the*
journey appeared overwhelming and difficult at first, it was made possible through collaboration with others and most importantly the willingness to be part of a multidisciplinary team. (Rueben, description sent via email, after the final interview)

A sense of connectedness with others is reinforced here. Rueben utilised his abilities to achieve a lot while recognising that this was not possible without the support and nurturing from others around him across the whole year.

Table 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Large rural centre</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After study and working in the disability sector, Julia gained a job as a full-time support crisis counsellor in a domestic violence team. The organisation and team were populated mostly by social work colleagues, who Julia described as inspiring role models from whom she could observe and learn as she consolidated her professional identity. Julia said she had an ideal first year characterised by support, access to professional development opportunities, and overcoming many challenges. She described growing every minute of every day; it was made clear to Julia that she can and should be a social worker in her role. However, reaching the high standard of the organisation was exhausting at times, and Julia found the nature of crisis domestic violence work had a personal impact on her. Her strengths and organisational support were crucial in managing this and achieving significant growth and development.

When reflecting on her whole journey, Julia emphasised three dimensions: gaining clarity about her strengths and weaknesses; having a safe space to learn; and realising the first year is only the beginning of learning: “So I think I’d just tell a new grad just believe in yourself, but be open to learning more and being challenged, [and], yeah, and it’s only the beginning; that’s the biggest thing, it’s only the beginning” (Julia, final interview).

Julia described that she embraced the experience of learning and was very keen to continue adding depth to her professional identity. She was unsure how long she
could remain in her current role but was very keen to stay in the organisation because of its supportive environment and the feminist social work she was able to do.

Table 17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nina described how her final field placement helped her to become an independent practitioner. It also led to a part-time, and later a full-time position, as a caseworker in a youth NGO. Working in a multidisciplinary setting, especially with psychologists, prompted Nina to reflect on what made her social work identity distinct from others. Over time, Nina clarified her professional identity and emphasised how social workers holistically look at micro, meso and macro dimensions of people’s lives. Nina developed this clarity through meaningful relationships with other social workers, colleagues, and her immediate manager. The latter used to comment on her way of thinking and acting as social worker. This provided some recognition and validation as to how Nina was being a social worker. Nina developed confidence and self-belief over time. She emphasised the importance of drawing from individual strengths to do this as well as having an accessible manager who supported her growth and development. Nina described her year as being ideal given the support she received from a positive organisation. Nina’s artefact was a Buddha statue that her university friends had given to her. It sat on her desk and represented relationships, learning and her transition:

...like I don't just glance at it and keep going; every time I see it, it reminds me of that and so obviously uni was very important to me; so I love reminders of uni; I love it...it was part of my learning at uni, and now it's part of my learning at work, almost. (Nina, final interview)

Nina emphasised the important connection the statue had with memories of her time at university. It was a time of significant change, and she had a group of close friends. The statue melded the past with the present as she continued in her journey with new
colleagues, who also commented on the statue. It was a continuation of her learning through relationships and memories.

Table 18  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Large rural centre</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chelsea was a part-time advocate in an NGO, a role she described as a stepping stone for building a foundation of experience. She described her first year as mixed as she perceived the organisational culture as poor, characterised by micromanagement and bullying. There was no supervision or meaningful access to professional development opportunities. Chelsea was determined to maintain her social work identity and continue growing. She undertook postgraduate social work study and research. These activities enabled her to have meaningful connections to a social work environment and like-minded professionals. Chelsea reinforced the importance of having work–life balance as part of her professional self-care throughout the year. By the final interview, Chelsea was reassessing employment options and aims as she wanted to move into a position that would provide support and opportunities for growth: “[To grow] probably a new job with some…development opportunities, but basically more room to grow, more room for me to…use more of my [social work] skill set…” (Chelsea, final interview).

While Chelsea was active in pursuing growth and development through study and research, it was still lacking in her position. The role was no longer challenging and Chelsea wanted something that would allow her to “spread her social work wings”. Her sentiments captured the underlying theme of her journey – the importance of engaging in growth and development and having access to such opportunities.
Table 19

Maggie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Australian Asian</td>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>Rock with indentations (Figure 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maggie had been working in Centrelink (statutory social security department) for over six years. At the first interview, she was employed as a case coordination officer/customer service advisor. Similar to Damon and Vivienne, Maggie was motivated to gain a position that would fully utilise her social work degree. She described how her social work identity would not fully flourish until she was in a suitable position. However, living in a capital city with high competition and cutbacks in employment opportunities were major barriers to finding a position. In her organisation, job promises and opportunities did not come to fruition. Maggie experienced a negative period because of these factors and workplace bullying perpetrated by a social work manager. She described never anticipating this kind of journey. After the second interview, Maggie moved to another capital city for family reasons and resigned from her organisation. After some time and reflection, Maggie decided to leave social work and return to university to study nursing. She wondered whether social work was ever the right profession for her. Maggie believed she would need more time to process her experiences but was grateful for how social work was informing some of her nursing studies. To describe her journey, Maggie’s artefact was a rock.

Figure 7. Maggie’s artefact (rock with indentations).
...it’s hard, like me – it’s weathered the storm. As you can see, it’s got blemishes or discolouration, so it’s sort of weathered...Yes, it’s hard as a rock but there are battle scars, but it’s still smooth...Smoothed out – everything has just washed over it and that’s how I’m going to take things; just go with the flow; if you can survive what you’ve done, everything is fine. (Maggie, final interview)

Maggie described being a strong person and yet despite her best efforts during the year, the storm still hit and bruised her. Over time, Maggie entered a new phase of her life and could see how those injuries were turning to scars; these scars will remain with her but will change over time.

Table 2
Jessica

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for most of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through field placement contacts, Jessica successfully gained a position as a family and carer mental health support worker in an NGO. After the first interview, Jessica moved from a large rural centre to a capital city to pursue a case management position in ageing. When she joined, major organisational changes were taking place. This was driven by socio-political changes in funding arrangements that emphasised individual choice and managerial principles.

In interviews two and three, Jessica reflected on how these major changes were not handled effectively within her organisation. A lot of workload pressure was placed onto staff and little attention was given to their concerns or needs, which resulted in workplace bullying. Jessica still saw herself as a social worker in this environment as she advocated with management and tried to have colleagues’ voices heard. However, there was very little support, and without meaningful change Jessica, considered finding work elsewhere. While the year had not been ideal, Jessica experienced growth in her confidence and professional identity, which was partly attributed to previous experience in the field: “I’m thankful that at least I had some experience there because otherwise I think it would’ve been quite a... quite a challenge, because
it’s been a challenging work environment for people who’ve had lots of experience” (Jessica, final interview).

Jessica used prior experiences to build her social work identity as an advocate and problem-solver in the organisation. This made a significant difference in staying with the organisation, and expressing her social work identity.

Table 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for most of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>Wilted flower with new leaf (Figure 8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Belinda gained a full-time position as an intensive family support worker, at the same NGO of her final placement. Belinda began the year positively and with a sense of excitement and optimism. She was in a multidisciplinary setting and like Nina and James, wanted to clarify her distinct social work identity. However, she experienced severe erosion of identity over time because of bullying by managers. These managers fostered a negative environment and provided no meaningful support for staff. Belinda experienced burnout that impacted her personally and professionally. Belinda described how she had no opportunity to reflect or thrive as a social worker. Instead her focus was on trying to survive her managers. Later in the year, Belinda decided to find work elsewhere but had very little confidence during job-seeking, because she could no longer describe what social work meant to her. By the end of interviewing, Belinda had been accepted into a graduate support program with a government organisation. To capture her experience, Belinda shared a wilted flower with a new leaf: “Initially I was going for like a dried lemon...But then then I thought, well, I’ve got this hope for the future now” (Belinda, final interview).
There was a sense of growth and blooming within the early stages of her transition; however, Belinda wilted quickly afterwards. There was no fertiliser (opportunities to be a social worker) or watering (support) from managers that allowed her to grow. Instead, Belinda felt constantly attacked and over-pruned to the point of seriously considering leaving social work. Her social work roots kept her in the profession and she was able to find new soil that gave her hope for the future.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location (for all of the year)</th>
<th>Artefact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After applying for a range of positions, Catherine accepted a full-time case work role with an NGO in foster care. She thoughtfully researched the organisation because she wanted to be somewhere that was well established. Catherine found it meaningful to be connected to her first supervisor and other social workers in her organisation. Those relationships were nurturing as she learnt about her role and developed confidence over time. However, the sector was undergoing major change, and this led to tightened resources and higher workloads later in the year. Catherine noticed how management became less supportive over time and she witnessed a high turnover of staff. Catherine remained optimistic and saw opportunities within this environment by staying focused on her work and advocating for her own needs. Catherine became increasingly confident and effective within her role, organisation and systems in her field, which was a major learning experience during the year. Catherine was keenly
aware of professional self-care as she described how the nature of the work inevitably has an impact on well-being. Overall, Catherine described her first-year journey as mostly positive.

*I think it’s been a real positive in my mind. I have really enjoyed it. I love learning, and it’s taught me how much I love learning...I think it’s just an individual learning experience, and it’s reflective of what you want to get out of it and what you put into it.* (Catherine, final interview)

Her statement reflected how she drew on her strengths to become increasingly confident in her role and the complex systems of foster care.

**Participant Demographics and Backgrounds**

This section of the chapter builds on the vignettes by collating the demographic and background details of all the participants. Table 23 captures their demographic information, including prior qualifications and experience in the human services sector.

**Table 23**

*Participant Demographic and Background Details*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants (17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>White Australian</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian Aboriginal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian African</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian Turkish/Kurdish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of study</td>
<td>On-campus (internal)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Off-campus (external/distance)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the participants were mature-age females from a white Australian background who had some prior experience in the human services sector. Most of the participants studied off-campus (distance/external). The few who studied via both modes, switched mostly to off-campus study later in their program in order to undertake field placement. These characteristics largely reflect the cohort of social work students enrolled at CSU (Bowles et al., 2015). The areas of study for the university degrees included arts, social welfare, social science, and health education. For the diplomas and certificates, the participants had qualifications in community services, counselling, training and assessment, hospitality, and graphic design. Many of the participants came to social work with prior careers, qualifications and experience.
Employment details. The employment type and field of practice for all participants across the interviewing period is detailed in Table 24.

Table 24

Employment Type and Field over the First Year Post-Qualification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of employment</th>
<th>Interview one (number of participants)</th>
<th>Interview two</th>
<th>Interview three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed outside of the human services sector</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field of employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of employment</th>
<th>Interview one</th>
<th>Interview two</th>
<th>Interview three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health (including mental health)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and domestic violence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and children services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income security</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged care</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed outside of the human services sector</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One participant was employed in full-time work and casual teaching work.

Most participants were employed in full-time positions for the whole year. All participants were employed in direct, client-based roles, including Geraldine who was also a program manager. Participants were almost evenly split between non-
government (9) and government (8) organisations, and this remained consistent throughout the year.

At the first interview, all 17 participants were either employed or were about to commence employment in the human services sector (Figure 9). Seven participants (Isabella, Michael, Geraldine, Vivienne, Damon, Maggie and Rueben) started the year in positions they had during their social work studies. Of these participants, four (Isabella, Michael, Geraldine and Rueben), stayed in their positions, and the other three (Damon, Maggie and Vivienne), actively sought a new job that would fully utilise their degrees. The remaining 10 had started, or were about to start, new positions confirmed following completion of study.

![Employment arrangements at the first interview](image)

**Figure 9.** Employment arrangements at first interview.

The chart shows that 13 participants sought a new social work-based job. The following methods were part of successfully applying for their position:

- Advertisements/Expressions of interest (Chelsea, Catherine, Gary, Vivienne, and Julia)

- Field placement networks (James, Belinda, Nina, Jessica, Claire, Cass)

- Directly approached organisations (Damon).

Maggie is not included because she did not gain a new job and later left the sector.
Most gained a position through advertisements or their networks, particularly those formed during field placement. Many participants said that field placement was an important gateway to future employment as potential employers may seek them out, which is consistent with some research in this area (Barton et al., 2005). For example, Gary was approached for a contract in a highly competitive setting where he did field placement. He noted how undertaking a placement had increased his chances of employment within the same organisation. Similarly, Maggie found it difficult to seek employment in health because employers prioritised those who undertook placement with them. Jessica, also discovered this, after moving home several years ago:

...I found it really difficult to get into the industry. Even though...I had a degree and had experience...that’s when I started to discover it’s very much about networks and connections and who you know...and a lot of jobs don’t even get advertised...It’s very much...who you know. And that’s actually how I got this position was through my social work supervisor. (Jessica, first interview)

Many participants agreed it was important to prepare for job seeking by assessing one’s interests, goals, skills, strengths, needs and weaknesses:

...I think at the last res school... it’s funny, you know; there was once or twice there I felt like, after being at both practicums, I felt like making an announcement to some of the students (laughs), you’ve really gotta have your professional framework understood within your own mind, because your prospective employer really will want to know it, and you know in my instances, you’ll have to justify that, not just explain it but, why is it that way?...So it can’t be a cloudy vision in your head, it’s gotta be something fairly consolidated...(Gary, first interview)

This suggests that employers expect graduates to be articulate and capable of detailing their professional identity and corresponding practice framework as part of assessing whether the applicant would be a good fit within the organisation.

Only three participants (Cass, Damon and Maggie) described struggles with job seeking. Cass began the year on a short contract and, afterwards, found it difficult to find work as there were few jobs available in her small rural location and employers preferred someone with prior experience. Maggie and Damon were also told previous
experience was preferred, and Maggie witnessed job cuts and higher competition amongst social work graduates in a metropolitan area.

**Job satisfaction and employment goals.** Participants were asked in each interview what it was like being in their job. Based on their descriptions, three types of job satisfaction emerged and captured their overall job satisfaction for the year, which remained consistent. Most of the participants described high (7) or good (7) job satisfaction for the year, and three described experiencing poor job satisfaction for most of the year.

Participants then detailed whether they intended to stay in their current position. By the end of the interviewing phase, six participants were motivated to stay in their current job for the moment. Another six were staying but were also open to future opportunities. Four were taking active steps towards finding a new job, which included those who described poor job satisfaction. Participants’ intentions to stay or find a new job were largely informed by personal interests, growth and development needs, organisational context and long-term career goals, which is consistent with the literature in this area (for example, Healy et al., 2015). Four participants noted that two years was an ideal minimum period for staying in a job, where possible:

...I wouldn’t even consider leaving for two years. I was talking to someone about this the other day and I think that it looks bad on your résumé to start with, and I don’t think you get the benefit of the employment if you’re not there two years… (Catherine, second interview)

Well, yes, in that I can see myself staying in this same position for two years; then I think I would like to move...and I may stay in mental health, but I can only see myself staying right here for two years. (Claire, second interview)

Some agreed this could change if the right opportunity came along or the current workplace was no longer sustainable (for example, Jessica, Belinda and Chelsea). Much of this will be explored in greater detail later in the thesis when looking at lived experience of fostering and eroding professional identity.
Discussion

The vignettes and background information show that most of the participants described experiencing a satisfying first year while having to adjust to changes and build their confidence. The artefacts were a useful way of articulating and sharing their whole journey, including aspects of professional identity. These lived materials resonate with Scholar’s (2016) exploration of how materials and objects can be imbued with meaning and connect to professional identity. The participants’ individual stories give a small taste for what the first-year journey can be like, which provides a basis for exploring their lived experience in greater detail, especially to consider commonalities across the group.

The demographics largely reflected the profile of the social work student body at CSU, except that most participants resided in rural and regional contexts. This is notable because it stands in contrast to the urbanised nature of Australia and social work, where most programs are delivered. Overall, while the group shared commonalities, especially in terms of gender and ethnicity, there were various nuances amongst the group in terms of qualifications and prior experience in the human services sector.

In relation to job seeking, the participants were either employed in positions they were working in during their study, or had gained new employment not long after graduation, which is consistent with wider social work graduate employment outcomes in Australia (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Their views about being prepared for job seeking are consistent with textbooks for newly qualified social workers in the UK (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Keen & Parker, 2013). However, this literature does not generally explore experiences of job seeking. In my study, there was variation in how well prepared some participants were for job seeking. For example, Damon did not expect job seeking to be an issue and had to work on his skills over the year. This raises questions about how well prepared graduates need to be for job seeking, and whether this should be addressed further during their social work studies.

Another challenging aspect to job seeking was the message that some employers preferred an applicant with experience. This created a dilemma for Maggie, Damon and Cass, who struggled to gain a job. These three participants resided in different geographical locations, including a small and a large rural centre, and a capital city. To become experienced, someone needed to give them an opportunity to gain it. Most
participants in this study were given that opportunity, which could be a promising sign for the social work profession. However, for the few who experienced difficulties, the employers said in some instances that they wanted an experienced worker who could “hit the ground running”. This could reflect Newberry’s (2014) concerns about neo-conservative discourses that tighten resources and place pressure on employers to hire experienced staff who can readily begin, with little ongoing support. If this is the case, it raises the question that if employers do not value and invest in new graduates with little experience, how can the sector, and social work profession be sustainable in the long-term. However, most participants in my study gained a position quickly, and so further research with larger representative samples would be needed to explore job-seeking experiences, challenges and barriers for newly qualified social workers. It would be worthwhile to understand what tips the balance for an organisation to not be willing to invest in someone inexperienced.

**Chapter Summary**

Seventeen newly qualified social workers self-selected to be in this study. Most of the participants were mature-aged females who had previous work experience in the human services sector and were located in rural and regional areas. Most were also successful with job-seeking, or staying in their current position, with only a few describing difficulties or experiencing a negative year overall. Their individual stories and demographics gave some insight into lived experience during the first 12 months post-qualification period. What impacted their lived experience will be further explored in the remaining chapters of the thesis.
Chapter 7
Lived Experience of Transition and Adjustment

The vignettes in the preceding chapter alluded to the participants having to adjust to changes as they moved from student to qualified practitioner. Chapter 7 further explores the participants’ lived experience of transition and adjustment during the first 12 months post-qualification period. The theme of transition and adjustment is about how participants changed, adapted and settled into their new lives as qualified practitioners.

Three areas of lived experience emerged and are detailed in the next section. The areas are transition and adjustment from university; transition and adjustment to the practice field; and transition and adjustment to their professional identity. This theme is central to the first question of the study about lived experience of professional identity.

Transition and Adjustment from University

The first major experience of transition and adjustment began when the participants completed their studies. Most of them described that disconnecting from university and acknowledging transition events was an important transition and adjustment to make (Figure 10). These adjustments, in turn, aided their move from student to qualified practitioner.

*Figure 10. Dimensions of transition and adjustment from university.*

The completion of their studies evoked mixed and unexpected feelings amongst the participants, regardless of their mode of study. Some were excited and looking
forward to gaining experience in the field; others were challenged by the prospect of disconnecting from the familiarity of academic life and adjusting to a new norm.

Seven participants, all of whom studied off-campus (distance/external), described an anticlimax or a feeling of abruptness at the completion of study; it was not what they expected: “...Because uni has stopped for me now, all of a sudden I’m a professional. And, okay, how do I be a professional? I don’t know what that is...” (Cass, first interview); “It doesn’t feel real yet, and everyone around me; oh my god, you’re a social worker. Congratulations...and I thought I would... [have an] elated sense of relief. I’m, like, I don’t know; it just feels weird” (Maggie, first interview); “And the degree sort of finished with such an abrupt feeling, and I just went, mmm, I don’t know if I’m a social worker yet” (Michael, final interview).

These participants experienced a transition gap, between the end of study and the initial transition into the field. They had been looking forward to the end of study, but when the moment arrived, it was not what they expected, or it came so quickly that it jolted them.

As our interviews progressed, the participants described disconnecting from university and its associated norms. They were moving further away from university life:

...the memories dim, the [social work] dialogue, you’re not having it, and that’s why it’s only ever recaptured here when those moments happen where I can have that dialogue. It’s a little bit with my co-worker when we can talk about different approaches to working with clients...It is stimulating... bouncing ideas backwards and forwards... (Geraldine, second interview)

The experience of university remained deeply with the participants across the year. Some missed the experience of academic learning and being embedded in a social work environment with students and lecturers on a regular basis. Over six to 12 months, they described adjusting to a “new normal”, where they found ways of meeting academic and professional needs:

...I still really like the academic stuff and I miss the academic stuff; but it’s now I suppose I have replaced that with my client and that person that I am working with at that time. They’re now my academic stuff because I want to go and find the research into why that particular behaviour [happens]...the trauma and the
brain and what’s happening inside for them and how is the brain affecting their emotions and then how can we assist in empowering them… (Cass, final interview).

To aid their experiences, the participants described some transition events, which marked turning points in their journey from student to qualified practitioner. For example, attending the graduation ceremony was perceived as a formal and ritualised marker of their whole journey and a shedding of their student identity: “...I’m going to go to graduation; it’s going to be a nice closing ritual...” (Isabella, first interview).

Most participants wanted to attend their graduation, but were unable, whereas Maggie believed it was not a meaningful activity. She placed greater emphasis on receiving the testamur. It was a tangible symbol of her achievement and part of moving towards a new professional identity. Other participants found informal ways of marking the occasion: “So I bought a card, a graduation card, and a box of chocolates and handed it over [to a colleague] ...because she also didn’t go to her graduation” (Geraldine, first interview).

Some regretted not having time to celebrate or mark the end of study: “It’s kind of weird for me, to be honest...I didn’t really get that chance to have this whole, “I’m finished”, moment. One just rolled on to the other. Things are so busy...” (James, first interview).

Several participants also noted that gaining a job aided the transition from university: “I suppose I’d always known I’d get a job, but I just didn’t think it would happen like that [happen quickly] ” (Chelsea, first interview).

Those who gained a position quickly described a sense of elation and receiving a confidence boost through external validation of their professional identity. It was meaningful for someone to want to employ them because it suggested they had “arrived” as a social worker. They could move beyond their student identity and step into their professional one.
Transition and Adjustment to Practice

The next major experience of transition and adjustment was in relation to participants settling into their new organisation and job, which involved orientation/induction, resolving unexpected realities, and reflecting on their preparedness for practice (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Dimensions of transition and adjustment to practice.

Orientation/induction. For the 12 participants who attained a new job, the initial orientation/induction was described as an important part of transition and adjustment to the field. For most, their initial orientation/induction was largely ad hoc and/or inappropriate:

...In terms of the job that you actually do – no nothing. I haven’t had anything; have never seen anybody here in the time that I have been here have anything.
(Jessica, second interview)

... months and months after...they’ll say stuff like why aren’t you doing this? And I’ll say I didn’t even know I had to do that...I’m getting into trouble for things, and I think, well, I should be doing that, but like when they say that, I say, well yes, that makes sense, but I didn’t even know that was there…
(Belinda, final interview)
In these examples, the orientation/induction process had been either too short, too generic, or it had glossed over important information. The few who had a good orientation/induction experience described that it was not a simple, one-off process that ended after a few days. A sustained approach was necessary over a period of weeks and even months. For example, Gary undertook a five-week induction before starting his job:

...I felt very well supported, and since my move from the coast here, they’ve just been fantastic in terms of helping me to relocate, support to my family, and providing education, and even now, being in a new office with people, it’s just been fantastic what they’ve done in terms of allocating a senior social worker to be there and guide us through… (Gary, second interview)

Gary found the induction to be thorough and appreciated the ongoing support for several months, which included his workload being progressively increased over time. He alluded to short- and long-term needs, where a formal orientation/induction process at the beginning was important, and was then followed up with ongoing support from colleagues and/or management.

Several participants used metaphors to describe what it is like to transition and adjust to practice, especially during initial orientation/induction. Five described being “thrown into the deep end” or “hitting the ground running”: “...I’m brand-new out! How do you just throw someone out there and go, you’ll be right...I’m still swimming, so” (Chelsea, first interview).

Despite this, participants described meeting the challenge; it just took some time to adjust. Some participants felt ready to start swimming straightaway. For example, James appreciated “being thrown into the deep end” during field placement:

...I was lucky that in my last placement I was quite hands on. So, it felt like it was a good transition...I was brought to a point in my last placement where I was ready to really go by myself. (James, first interview)

However, because of her limited role and negative experiences, Maggie described how she did not even “get into the pool”: “I didn’t even put my foot in the pool.... [I] unofficially dipped my toe in” (Maggie, final interview).
Julia also used water-based metaphors throughout her interviews, seeing herself as a swimming duck: on the surface she appeared calm but underneath she was paddling furiously, trying to stay afloat:

*I’m like the... the proverbial duck...going like hell under that water.* (Julia, first interview)

*I’m probably more days where I’m the poor little duck going like 100 miles per hour, but I’ve had days where I’m kind of swimming and I’m lying on my back looking at the sun, looking at the sky and the water, so that’s been nice. I have made progress, so I really want to give myself more of that; I don’t want to steal that away from myself; I think that would be silly.* (Julia, second interview)

Other participants used road or track-based metaphors to describe their experiences: “The rubber hits the road” or whatever. Now...I’ve gotta ‘come up with the goods’...it’s not an academic practice anymore, it’s the real thing” (Claire, first interview).

Maggie said she was in the starting blocks and was ready to get into her career, but needed “the gun (a job) to be fired”: “I want that gun to go off...bam...I really don’t know how I will be until I’m in that position” (Maggie, first interview).

In later interviews, Maggie described “falling off” the starting blocks, and then no longer being on the race track because of leaving the profession. For the other participants, it took about three to six months to gain greater clarity regarding their role and to find their feet in the organisation.

**Reality, expectations and culture shock.** As described earlier, some participants experienced a jolt when their studies initially ended, and this also occurred for some when they transitioned into the field. Only Claire specifically mentioned experiencing some initial culture shock in a government organisation:

...*I had a creative career before. I also worked with people; there was always [a sense of] possibility, and I am finding in health there’s a lot of negativity and attitude more that things can’t be done or it’s too hard or people are too tired or it’s too much effort and so won’t say yes to that...* (Claire, second interview)
Claire perceived this to be part of her adjustment to the organisation. Six participants had to adjust to some unexpected realities such as differences between job description and reality (Chelsea); lack of access or issues with supervision (Belinda and Chelsea); and unhelpful social workers or other professionals (Chelsea). Some unexpected realities also emerged later in the year such as leaving the profession (Maggie) and experiencing poor management and organisational culture (Chelsea, Belinda, Jessica, Catherine, Claire and Maggie).

Some of these experiences are common to those described in the wider literature including Agllias (2010), whose participants were surprised to encounter social workers who behaved quite differently from what they understood as ethical practice. Most of the six participants described adjusting to or resolving those unexpected realities within a few months, depending on the severity of the issue (for example, poor management). Therefore, there was less discussion about transition and adjustment to practice by the final interview.

**Preparedness for practice.** Throughout the year, 13 participants found themselves wondering whether their social work studies sufficiently prepared them for practice. They came from a mix of backgrounds, with most having prior experience in the human services sector (10) and attaining new employment at the conclusion of their studies (10).

All described feeling prepared overall, which eased their transition into practice. The following subjects/topics were mentioned as particularly beneficial to participants’ preparation:

- Core social work theory and practice subjects, especially the final one that included a focus on new graduates and professional identity
- Mental health
- Psychology subjects, especially ageing
- Policy and politics

Some of these responses reflected where the participants were now working. For example, James found studying a subject on the psychology of ageing proved to be very useful in his hospital work with patients experiencing dementia.
Four participants detailed some areas in which they would have liked to have gained more knowledge or experience:

- Job-seeking and initial transition
- Mental health
- Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Specialist streams to the degree

Julia contemplated whether specialist streams would be worthwhile in the degree:

> So it [study] gives you a base which made me sort of think should they offer specialist sort of streams in social work prac...you don’t have to take it up, you can do just a general sort of social work what we did with the degree, but also should there be, like, can you specialise while you’re at uni, and should there be more opportunity to maybe specialise in mental health. (Julia, second interview)

Catherine also reflected on the generic nature of the degree and described it as a double-edged sword:

> ...there are so many different aspects to social work, like in some ways it’s...you can do so many different types of employment; in some ways that’s a little bit to the detriment of the social worker because you come up with a fairly broad generic kind of training; it’s not really job specific. (Catherine, second interview)

They both agreed it is difficult to rectify some of those elements as university study can only do so much.

**Transition and Adjustment to Professional Identity**

All participants experienced a transition and adjustment to their professional identity and discussed it throughout all their interviews. There were three dimensions to their lived experience: consolidating a social work identity; clarifying a distinct social work identity; and/or settling into a social work identity (Figure 12). There were broad commonalities across the group, but participants developed at their own pace and were influenced by individual and social contexts.
Figure 12. Dimensions of transition and adjustment to professional identity.

**Consolidating a social work identity.** All participants described articulating and solidifying their social work identity as part of their transition and adjustment. Most described emerging from study with an idea or image of the kind of social worker they wanted to be; once they had graduated, the challenge became to enact and consolidate their identity. Central to this experience was the question of who am I as a social worker. Cass used a flower metaphor to capture this experience:

*So I suppose uni was the seed for me because it was kind of “what’s this values and ethics stuff?” I’ve got to learn all this; I’ve got to do an assignment, but now it’s like, okay, I see that’s what I was – yeah, that was the seed for me and now it’s starting to sprout and the values and the ethics and the identity and the responsibility, and it’s all just starting to come into a big bean stalk and blooming with beautiful flowers.* (Cass, final interview)

A few participants realised later in the year that they had emerged from university study with little clarity about who they were as a social worker:

*I think you definitely finish uni and you think to yourself: “I still have got no idea what I am doing; I have got no idea how to be a social worker; I have got no idea what I am doing”, and I feel like in this role I have got a better idea of how to be a social worker.* (Nina, second interview)
Belinda and Claire agreed with this and emphasised this can occur because some aspects of identity are unknown. Maggie realised this earlier in the year:

_I think I know probably what type of social worker I want to be...or I know what I wouldn’t want to be like... I don’t think I can really fully comprehend or get in...until I’m in that [social work] role or that type of role._ (Maggie, first interview)

Over the course of the year, participants consciously worked on translating what they gained from study into reality. By the second interview, some participants reflected on how they were well on track with consolidating their social work identity, but they emphasised that they needed more time and experience: “..._I still have an ideal about who I want to be as a professional. That image is fairly clear in my head; it’s whether or not I’ll be able to achieve that_” (Gary, second interview).

Gary reinforced that development was contextual as he worked in a large and complex government organisation in a remote location. He believed it would take time and experience, perhaps over several years, to build on his current progress.

As the year progressed, the participants’ social work identities were increasingly consolidated as they experienced practice and engaged in critical reflection:

_I think it has changed because I didn’t have the clarity then that I have now about what or even what a social worker does. I didn’t have a clear idea, and I also didn’t have a clear idea of how to use my qualities in social work, and I’ve got a better handle on that now_… (Claire, final interview)

Reflecting on prior interviews, Claire came to realise that she did not have clarity when she first emerged from university study. Through time, experience and ongoing reflection, she was able to consolidate her professional identity beyond her initial expectations. This suggests the importance of lived time and how knowledge and understanding of self is fluid and can change through new experiences.
For the participants who started in a new position at the beginning of the year, there were some parallels between settling into their job role and consolidating their professional identity. They started the year wanting to understand their job and professional identity, but for some, they became more focused on learning their role first:

...you start off just wanting to learn how to do your job. So you start off with that’s your goal, [which] is to learn how to do things right, and then once you’ve started to be able to do things correctly, then you can work on that identity side of it, like how do I want to work. (Nina, final interview)

Nina’s comment suggests she started with a task-based identity that was focused on doing and learning the functions of her role first; as she gained clarity and confidence over time, she was able to settle into her role but also develop and consolidate her social work identity.

For those who remained in the same employment positions throughout the year, they re-examined their job role and what it now meant to have a social work qualification:

...especially given that I was qualified in the same role, in the same job, I really was asking myself: “Okay, so am I going to be different, is there anything I can do differently now that I’m qualified?” (Rueben, final interview)

By the final interview, most participants, depending on how long they had been in a position, confirmed that they had consolidated their social work identity, which is similar to findings in other studies (Campanini et al., 2012; Kearns & McArdle, 2011).

However, the participants anticipated that the journey of consolidating a professional identity was by no means complete at the end of the first 12 months post-qualification period. They saw themselves as lifelong learners and believed their social work identity would continue to grow and change into the future.

**Clarifying a distinct social work identity.** Eleven participants described having to clarify their distinct social work identity as part of transition and adjustment over the year. The question they asked themselves was: how am I social worker compared to others? Answering this question was particularly important for practitioners working in multidisciplinary settings or positions with generic titles (for example,
caseworker), where they worked alongside people with diverse qualifications:

“...Well, because both my pracs had people from all different backgrounds, so it wasn’t only social work based...so I would sort of think to myself, what makes me a social worker here?” (Nina, first interview), “...I sort of get a bit confused when you go out because people are...doing the same work that I’m doing, why am I different?” (Belinda, first interview).

For some, they found it was important to find a balance between their role boundaries and profession. Clarifying a distinct social work identity was also important when mediating dominant discourses and cultures, as James talked about in his hospital setting:

...we have to bring something different to the mix here; we need to bring a different perspective. But that’s always in the forefront of my mind. There’s no point just going along with all the other professions as I said; I mean, we become redundant otherwise. (James, second interview)

Therefore, gaining clarity meant the participants were able to articulate the value of their social work roles:

I see it [social work role] as a valuable asset to any health service...I see it as a really good glue between a lot of services...if this role is done right, you can be such a good conduit for services. (Michael, final interview)

Like consolidation of identity, it took approximately six to 12 months for participants to clarify and express the distinct features social work can offer in their workplace.

**Settling into a social work identity.** The third dimension of transition and adjustment to professional identity was about settling into it; where a social work identity was internalised and incorporated into the whole self. Seven participants described having to reach a point where their social work identity sat comfortably within them before they could answer the question can I call myself a social worker:

“...but as a personal identity I guess I’m still getting used to the label [of social worker]” (Geraldine, first interview), “I haven’t really fully identified it [social work identity], I haven’t really used it” (Maggie, first interview).
Being comfortable also meant being able to identify as a social worker with others:

*I’m probably settling more into myself as a person; hence, [I’m] more comfortable actually with the idea that I’m a social worker because I was thinking about this a couple of days ago. And I thought, I remember I was a bit hesitant to call myself a social worker.* (Isabella, second interview)

For some, this experience emerged when comparing themselves to experienced practitioners: “*I didn’t feel comfortable calling myself a social worker in front of other longer-term social workers, for example…they’re confident, they’re comfortable in themselves, they know what they’re doing…*” (Isabella, second interview).

Isabella was expressing the sense that she had to earn the right to be called a social worker.

There were variations as to when participants settled into their professional identity, which could have taken anywhere between three and 12 months. By their second interview, Cass, Claire and Isabella described successfully settling into their social work identity: “*I think it’s just been a gradual growing of being more and more happy to say…I’m a social worker*” (Claire, second interview).

For Catherine, Geraldine and Michael it took six to 12 months:

*I’ve embraced it [social work identity] a bit better now… When I first went for this job, I went, “I can’t be a social worker”…I expected there to be something I’d have to write, you know, when you finish your degree; I was waiting to have to do a thesis.* (Michael, final interview)

*I’m feeling much more comfortable… [to] be able to say I’m a social worker.* (Geraldine, final interview)

*I feel like I can say with confidence I am a social worker. I would say [before] that I was learning to be a social worker. I didn’t feel like I was a social worker.* (Catherine, final interview)

These participants had a mixture of employment experience in the human services sector before their social work qualification, with some coming to the profession with experience (Claire, Isabella, Geraldine and Michael) or none (Cass and Catherine).
This indicates what Donnellan and Jack (2015) emphasise, and that is that despite previous experience in the field, newly qualified social workers still need to adjust to joining the profession. Prior experience does not necessarily guarantee one automatically transitions into a professional social work identity. In my study, some participants with prior experience had to reconfigure who they were before and after qualification.

**Discussion**

The participants’ stories reveal that they had to transition and adjust in various ways over the first 12 months post-qualification period. The experiences and dimensions to transition and adjustment can be summarised and broadly mapped across three timeframes of this period (Table 25).

**Table 25**

*Timeframes for Transition and Adjustment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Transition and adjustment from university</th>
<th>Transition and adjustment to practice</th>
<th>Transition and adjustment to professional identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completion of study</td>
<td>Disconnecting from university; transition events</td>
<td>Orientation/induction; realities, expectations and culture shock; preparation for practice</td>
<td>Consolidating identity; clarifying distinct identity; settling into identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First six months</td>
<td>Disconnecting from university; transition events</td>
<td>Orientation/induction; realities, expectations and culture shock; preparation for practice</td>
<td>Consolidating identity; clarifying distinct identity; settling into identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six to 12 months</td>
<td>Disconnecting from university</td>
<td>Preparation for practice</td>
<td>Consolidating identity; clarifying distinct identity; settling into identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the year the participants had to disconnect from university, settle into practice and develop their professional identity. There were commonalities within the group, but also nuances as they adjusted and changed within their own contexts. Therefore, many of the dimensions spanned most of the year, which supports Galpin et al. (2012), who argue that it can take six to 12 months for newly qualified social
workers to fully transition into practice, and individual variation must be taken into consideration.

The UK textbooks about being newly qualified, such as Donnellan and Jack (2015), acknowledge how the transition from university to practice can be an important change. Participants in my study experienced that important change and some difficult emotions along the way. The transition gap, which included anticlimactic feelings and a sense of abruptness at the completion of their studies, raises questions for educators about how to support the completion of study and the initial transition to work as advocated by Clapton (2013). For some participants, it was not just about job-seeking but processing the experience of finishing university, sharing the emotions around this, and transitioning into the field. It is noteworthy that seven participants who studied off-campus experienced an anti-climax at the end of their studies, whereas participants who studied on-campus or by mixed mode did not comment on this phenomenon. This could suggest that off-campus students need targeted support when they reach the end of their degree. However, most participants studied via distance, which could account for the dominance of their voices in this area. Regardless of the mode of study, newly qualified social workers may need formal support as they leave university and transition into the field.

The importance of recognising or marking the transition and adjustment from university is an important theme. The transition events, such as getting a job, are reinforced in the wider literature (for example, Galpin et al., 2012), including the transition models from Nicholson’s (1990) work, which are used in social work to encourage new practitioners to reflect on their achievements and the journey of change. For the participants in my study, some of these moments were formal and clear, such as graduation, and others were experienced spontaneously; all had meaning and allowed the participants to acknowledge how far they had come. With this in mind, there is room to further explore the experience of transitioning from university and how that can be mediated during and after completion of study.

Only some participants experienced “reality hits”, and most participants described being prepared for the field, which is similar to descriptions in other recent literature (Agliias, 2010; Wilson, 2013). However, there is further scope for the exploration of the organisational contexts the participants experienced, especially in relation to orientation/induction. The wider literature identified that a good orientation/induction
is necessary (Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Jaskyte, 2005; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004; McPherson & Barnett, 2006). In my study, there were mixed experiences. Furthermore, the issue of generic study versus specialist streams highlight ongoing debates in social work (Healy & Meagher, 2007), and tensions between universities and employers in preparing practitioners for the field – What should each be doing?

In terms of transition and adjustment to professional identity, the participants’ experiences are especially central to the first research question of this study: “How is professional social work identity experienced during the first 12 months post-qualification? The literature highlights that newly qualified social workers gain greater clarity regarding their identity by the end of the first year (Kearns & McArdle, 2011), especially by consolidating their study into their identity (Campanini et al., 2012; Galpin et al., 2012). Participants’ experiences in my study reflect that, but add greater detail by revealing particular dimensions that are not fully captured in the literature in terms of consolidating, clarifying and settling into their social work identity. No matter where they lived or worked, the participants were prompted to clarify and consolidate their professional identity, especially because they were employed in diverse roles and settings. This resonates with calls from Donnellan and Jack (2015) for newly qualified social workers to build their professional identity during the first year by articulating the expertise and contribution of social work. In my study, it was beneficial for the participants to gain a better sense of who they were individually as well as being part of a wider collective profession. There appeared to be internal and external factors influencing their experiences, such as individual perceptions and learning, as well as relationships in the wider environment that supported their development. External factors were also present for those settling into their professional identity as they were not necessarily comfortable identifying with others, or they believed they had not earned the title of social worker despite their qualification. The participants’ experiences highlighted the importance of relationships and the perceptions of others and encouraged further exploration of those dimensions to see how those perceptions fostered and/or eroded their professional identity.

Finally, the wider literature discusses changes to professional identity but mostly draws on role transition models from other disciplines (Galpin et al., 2012; Fenge, 2013). Participants’ stories in my study shared similarities with the role transition model (Figure 1) as they had to encounter and adjust to their new identity. It took up
to 12 months for most participants to fully transition and/or adjust to their professional identity and consequently become more proficient. This suggests these transition models are useful and could be further researched and extended to focus more clearly on professional identity.

**Chapter Summary**

After the participants completed their studies, they had to transition and adjust to the field and their professional identity as a qualified social worker. Their first 12 months post-qualification was an important time of change, which involved shedding their student identity and fully adopting their professional one. Assuming a professional identity was a central feature of their post-qualification period. Disconnecting from university and moving into practice was at times turbulent, including when initial orientation/induction was inadequate, but most believed their education prepared them for the field. Overall, the participants were able to consolidate, clarify and/or settle into their professional identity. The journey did not simply unfold on its own; participants alluded to the importance of being critically reflective to articulate who they are. This raises questions about what the participants revealed about who they are, including what it means to be a social worker.
Chapter 8
Lived Experience of Social Work Identity

In the previous chapter, the participants revealed that as they transitioned and adjusted, especially to their professional identity, they articulated what it means to be a social worker. This chapter explores those meanings in greater depth, through the interconnected and shared dimensions of being, knowing/thinking and doing, which reflect the definition of professional identity in my study. During each interview, participants were asked what it meant to be a social worker, what theory and knowledge they used, and how they practised as a social worker. Their descriptions indicated what aspects of their identity emerged, developed and changed over the course of the year, which became fundamental to how their professional identity was experienced.

Being a Social Worker

All participants agreed that being a social worker requires passion, commitment and belief in what the profession stands for; it is not simply about stepping in and out of a job. From their descriptions, three dimensions emerged about being a social worker: a social work mindset, a personal and professional fit, and perceptions of professionalism (Figure 13).

![Figure 13. Being a social worker.](image)

The social work mindset. The first dimension of being involved is having a social work mindset, which would reflect how the participants viewed a particular situation in their everyday world. Their mindset was based on beliefs and worldviews, and values and ethics that created a way of seeing clients and situations. Participants’ descriptions revealed four overlapping dimensions of a social work mindset:
• Holistic
• Person-in-environment
• Multidimensional
• Client-centred

All participants talked about a holistic mindset, and how it involves viewing someone as a whole person with bio-psycho-social dimensions: “...a client might be presenting with one issue, but I always sort of take into consideration those other things that might be happening as well” (Nina, second interview).

This mindset then overlaps with a person-in-environment mindset. As Catherine (first interview) stated: “... [we] mediate environmental impacts on people and outcomes...”. In other words, the participants cared about how the wider socio-cultural environment impacted people’s lives. Isabella extended this by also embracing the physical environment:

...when greening social work was mentioned [in a lecture], I felt that, yes, back to ecology, and, hello, we’re bringing it into social work, and I just felt...such a sense of relief that I didn’t have to actually put that...aside any more. (Isabella, first interview)

Environmentalism was a strong part of her personal identity, and Isabella was excited to learn that social work is now incorporating this into the person-in-environment mindset.

Many participants described how a holistic and person-in-environment mindset are incorporated into a multidimensional mindset, where they look at, and try to work across micro, meso and macro layers to bring about change. Julia emphasised the collective effort of the profession in this:

I could get all, like, academic and say, well, it [social work] means challenging the status quo and patriarchy, but really the day-to-day grind of being a social worker, what that means to me, just chipping away at making a bit of a difference and being consistent with that...if we’re all working towards the same [goal] in all our different areas...collectively we can make a difference. (Julia, second interview)
Julia highlighted the importance of a shared goal social workers aim for and appreciated how they can do this in various ways and across various layers. Although, her statement suggests a separation between academia and practice, which does not fully reflect the IFSW (2014) definition of social work as an academic and practice-based profession. Also, there appears to be a desire to pursue a more pragmatic day-to-day goal, which could dismiss aspects of her multidimensional mindset. Nonetheless, Julia looked beyond herself as an individual and at how she could contribute to a broader shared goal, along with others.

Finally, all participants talked about having a client-centred mindset based on ensuring clients’ experiences, expertise and strengths were central, honoured and amplified within social work intervention as much as possible: “I actually get to help people and help people change their lives to the way they want...” (Chelsea, first interview).

The participants believed that people have worth and deserve to have autonomy, where they can make their own decisions. Several participants expressed discomfort about taking over people’s lives and preferred promoting self-determination as much as possible. However, they also detailed that client-centred practice was not always straightforward as there are specific circumstances where action was needed, outside of the client’s wishes, such as in an acute crisis. In other words, there may be times where one has to be direct:

[You’ve] really gotta fight, advocate for people that can’t do it themselves. You gotta be their voice I think...people can be in such states where they can’t think clearly, they can’t articulate things. And it’s your job to try to make some sense of that. To try to put some priorities, some order, and put them in the right direction. Point them somewhere where they need to go. (Maggie, first interview)

Gary also identified how there can be competing forces with social control functions within job roles, such as at Centrelink, which is a statutory social service department. Social workers can be agents of control when operating under the directives of government policies: “...I’m finding that social work has also lost its... its intent is to assist; it can also be used as a process for coercion...” (Gary, second interview).
As such, there were conflicting agendas between governments and clients that placed some participants in challenging situations. Despite this, the participants described throughout the year being strongly guided by the client context as much as possible.

**Personal and professional fit.** The second dimension to being a social worker is about having a personal and professional fit. Thirteen participants said there was a good fit between their personal and professional aspects of self. These participants said that both aspects aligned and made being a social worker a logical choice: “...I bring the two together; I’m one and the same for me...” (Julia, second interview), “...my identities, my personal and professional values and sort of own belief system I feel [are] very tied in together” (Belinda, first interview).

The participants believed they did not come to social work as a blank canvas; they came with a history, personal beliefs and values, and life experience, all of which informed who they were as a professional. They believed that the individual is able to then develop their own personal style within the shared goals of the profession:

Well, for me it’s love, but for someone else it might be justice – it might be some other impulse, but I do think you can’t be a social worker unless you have the impulse to be a social worker. (Claire, second interview)

Much of this description complements how professional identity is defined in social work as incorporating personal and professional aspects of self (Dewane, 2006).

A major motivation for participants to join social work was because of this personal/professional fit. They all referred to existential desires as part of being a social worker: “...it feels like to have meaning in your life...and to have meaning in your work...I just... you can’t describe how good that feels. And I’m really lucky; I feel, my social work degree has completed me” (Julia, first interview).

Participants also referred to it as: “... [a] sense of purpose...” (Catherine, first interview), “...just to do something good in my life” (Chelsea, first interview), and “...making a difference...” (Jessica, first interview). Those who changed careers to become social workers also mentioned how they were seeking meaningful purpose.
James was an ideal example of this:

*I’d been involved in hospitality for a long time and I’d worked in all sorts of roles in hospitality but it didn’t seem to be particularly fulfilling for me... it’s important to be part of the community. Not just take…* (James, first interview)

Five participants described social work specifically as a vocation, for example:
“...it’s some inner core thing...it’s like a calling, people have...” (Catherine, first interview), “...even if they closed all the social work jobs down I’d still practise” (Gary, first interview).

Some participants argued being a social worker should not be an ego-driven activity for gain at the expense of others; it should be a mutual exchange:

*I was searching for work that I didn’t feel took more than I had. I don’t know if that explains it properly, but I always felt in [my previous career] it was stealing something from me, or that I was selling my soul in a way, so I was longing for a job that took just enough, but not too much out of me, and that it came easily, and I believe that this is the job.* (Claire, second interview)

Claire’s comment reflects the importance of congruency between personal and professional aspects of self. Participants’ motivations for meaningful purpose provide some further insight into what attracts people to social work, which could be useful for social work educators to be aware of when recruiting prospective students.

While all participants acknowledged there was an important connection between personal and professional aspects of self, how closely each aspect overlapped varied. For most, the personal and professional were closely aligned or integrated, which is described by Osteen (2011). Damon was an exception and had what Osteen (2011) refers to as an evolving identity. Damon spoke of finding some separation between the personal and professional:

*I’d like to be in a social work job, making some decent money, and then just being able to like, you know, helping people out, but then on the weekend and what not, or just even after work, I can do what I want.* (Damon, first interview)

For Damon it was important to have some boundaries between the personal and professional. He said his professional identity was contextual to his young life stage. Damon later acknowledged his education had changed him personally and that he
continued to mature. Another example was Michael, who found his identity shifted over the year. By the final interview, he had become more self-aware and had created some boundaries between personal and professional aspects of self:

*I probably lived a blended personality approach, like there was a bit of me in everything, there was half social work, half [Michael]. Whereas now I’ve probably been able to really wear the badge here at work and then really take it off and really be home, and be comfortable with that...the social work identity and you have your own personal identity. And I’ve probably got that in the last year that they are two different entities... I’m still me across the board, but I’ve had to almost categorise the environment...* (Michael, final interview)

Michael and Damon emphasised that while there may be some separation between work and home life, the personal and professional aspects of self were not in opposition.

These boundaries were talked about by many of the other participants, who were self-aware of how personal values and beliefs can impact professional work. They argued that the connection must be managed carefully. For example, Rueben reflected on recognising similarities and differences between personal spirituality and the professional context:

*Obviously, I have some Catholic values, but I might be working with people that might not... I shouldn’t judge them along those lines to say this is what you’re not supposed to be doing.... just being mindful of my [religious] values so that I don’t let them impact on other people.* (Rueben, first interview)

Participants maintained that one has to manage personal and professional aspects of self to maintain professional integrity, an ability that the broader literature strongly emphasises and connects to being reflexive – for example, Miehls and Moffatt (2000).

**Perceptions of professionalism.** The final dimension of *being* a social worker is about perceptions of professionalism, which all participants talked about in their interviews. Their perceptions of professionalism were based on an identity from their social work qualification and being critically reflective.
Social work qualification as part of professionalism. For 11 of the participants, a fundamental part of their professionalism was having a specific social work qualification. For many, it was frustrating to notice others who had not studied social work and yet called themselves social workers. These participants reinforced a professional identity in the social work qualification because it reflected what they went through to reach this point: “...you need a four-year degree [to be a social worker], you need lots of blood, sweat and tears...you have to go through pain” (Cass, second interview).

When asked can anyone be a social worker, it was broadly agreed that not everyone can, and even if someone gains the qualification, it does not mean they are actually being a social worker:

...if you complete the social work degree, does that make you a social worker?
... I don’t think that does...I think that the journey, it gives you the skill base. I’ve always thought the degree would give me the toolbox, and then I would add the element to it. The person themselves is really what the job is and then I think the degree’s offered me that structure...scholarly knowledge...understanding of theories, all that sort of background that you need. (Michael, first interview)

Therefore, having a qualification was only one part of being: “...I think it’s also practising some of the stuff, the things that we learnt, embedding that into our day-to-day practice...” (Geraldine, second interview).

Damon emphasised that one should always be professional at work, but he believed people do not have to be perfect, or a miracle worker: “Don’t expect to be a saint. I get the feeling like just because you’re in a profession that helps people out, people expect you to be a saint. And it’s like, well, no” (Damon, first interview).

Damon’s comment reflected his ideas about personal aspects of self and professional helping, but it could also be communicating his fears about meeting the expectations of professional standards in social work.
The qualification means having a framework of knowledge, skill, values and ethics to achieve change:

...being a social worker, still, is different because it is a qualification; it is having a title. It does come with a qualification, I think it’s also connected to what makes that different from the person who doesn’t have that is that it comes with a professional practice framework. Immediately that’s the first thing I can grab. It comes with a structured way of approaching change, it comes with intervention practice, it comes with theory, it comes with a code of ethics, it comes with all of these things that are different to what a very strong and powerful community member does in implementing change, so it gives me that, and I love that. I love that it gives me that structure; it gives me structure, it gives me a focus, it gives me a theoretical base. (Isabella, final interview)

Isabella’s reflection illustrates elements of a profession that includes formal structures such as a code of ethics and a distinct theoretical base (Beddoe, 2013). It also reflects how knowledge, values and a distinct qualification can be reference points for constructing a professional identity. This was described by other participants, who perceived social work values and ethics as being central to their professionalism:

“...I’m always having the ethics, the AASW ethics on my desk every time I refer to them now and again just to refresh my memory as a learning practitioner...”
(Rueben, first interview); “At this point my professional identity is completely values driven, you know, it’s... it’s integrated into me...” (Isabella, first interview)

Being values driven is similar to the responses from social work participants in recent Australian studies (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Healy et al., 2015). However, while some of the respondents, including social workers, were ambivalent about professional identity in one of these projects (Harrison & Healy, 2015), participants in my study explicitly embraced a professional social work identity.
Critical reflection as part of professionalism. Across all the interview phases, the participants described critical reflection as an integral part of professionalism and identity. It was based on being and becoming self-aware, and being a lifelong learner, who can account for their personal and professional context:

...I think that the social work education I’ve received has tried to be as transparent as possible, I mean...we’ve even...critiqued the social work code of ethics...I think that’s brilliant. (Isabella, first interview)

...your learning is continuous. It is ongoing and it is flexible because we work in the world with people. So when you work in a world full of people, people are evolving and evolving and evolving. And if we don’t evolve with the people that we work with, then we’re not doing them any justice. (Michael, first interview)

Belinda anticipated at the beginning of the year that her professional identity might even erode if she could not be critically reflective:

...disengaging from critical reflection and thinking about theories or research or just going off on your own two feet...and not being sort of accountable to anything. Just going I think this is the right thing to do, whatever. Just go do it. And I think just getting too comfortable...And not...challenging myself so I can grow. And I think not challenging yourself as a professional, not engaging in conversations, or, research or even just practice development training and things like that. (Belinda, first interview)

This was later confirmed when Belinda experienced a poor first 12 months post-qualification period, where there were few opportunities to stop and think about her work. The participants believed their identities were multilayered and constantly being revealed or changed, and so they must be able to reflect, account and evolve over time:

I just can’t imagine stop[ping] reflecting because it has been the main stone of my current practice – reflecting and maybe stepping back a little and just giving a deep breath…I can’t imagine how you could manage things when you don’t reflect… (Rueben, second interview)
Without being able to reflect, critique and change, professionalism could be compromised.

**Knowing/Thinking as a Social Worker**

This section is about the knowledge and theory participants used and developed over the year. All participants emphasised that knowledge and theory is an important part of professionalism and professional identity:

...another primary focus of mine has been just using theory to account why I practised in a certain way instead of sentiment or things of that nature. I’ve already seen so far people expressing feelings as to why they want to help this person or things like that and not applying theory and it kind of irks me a bit because I kind of think you need to justify why you’re doing it, and there will be a reason. And you’re going to lay your hands on it, why not use it? Then it makes us look professional, not like we’re just this group of softies that are all sitting around in the back corner. (Gary, second interview)

Participants also agreed that knowing/thinking should reflect and fit with aspects of being, such as values and beliefs:

I guess it’s around how I’d like to see myself, as... as a practitioner, how I’d like to practice, and what I’d like to represent in the work that I do and the people that I work with… (Jessica, first interview)

Fifteen participants described that their use of theory and knowledge evolved and/or deepened over the course of the year. These participants explored approaches, which were integrated into their practice frameworks, as part of consolidating their professional identities.

All participants described being eclectic, with the use of knowledge being contextual to personal and professional aspects of self (beliefs and worldview), the client situation (what will work best with them), and field of practice (what works in this field). For example, participants working in mental health were more likely to talk about using the recovery model:

... [I am] certainly strengths based...and that fits very well with the recovery model as well. Being the policy of mental health at the moment, and it suits me...
well, I feel comfortable with it. I’ll certainly be using recovery. (Claire, first interview)

All participants described a close affinity with the strengths-based perspective, which reflected their client-centred mindset:

*The one theory that really...sticks out for me is strengths based... I’m really a fan of trying to help them [clients] see their own potential, and that they can do things and that they are a worthy person. So I’m really sort of into strengths based, and I really do believe that the young person is the expert of their own life.* (Nina, first interview)

Several participants observed other practitioners who claim not to use theory, or say it is unimportant, which they found concerning. Geraldine and Gary also noted how some practitioners only use parts of theory without understanding the background or worldview of the framework:

*I hear people working from a strengths based perspective and they don’t actually know what they are talking about...they know...the basics, you’re drawing out people’s strength...but that’s about where it stops.* (Geraldine, first interview)

...they’ll get brief training in strength-based training, or they’ll start to get psycho-social assessment training and stuff like that. It’s just when people are starting to get that sort of training, I think is that because they think they’ve got a complete knowledge of everything else that encompasses that approach or that assessment. (Gary, second interview)

This lack or superficial use of theory stood in contrast to the participants’ perceptions of professionalism and identity: “*I think you would need some sort of theory base to connect it all together and go that makes sense. Because without it, I think you’d struggle to actually work out what’s going on*” (Chelsea, first interview).
Despite the importance of knowledge and theory to their professional identity, some participants said it was challenging to reflect on it or be conscious about using theory, especially when busy:

*I haven’t had much [of a] chance to reflect on the theories I operate on, and we’re operating on... I, don’t think I consciously sit there going, “well, I’m going to use this strengths perspective right now” ... I suppose later on I have time to reflect on it, but inevitably because it’s the way that I think it’s probably the theory I probably try…* (James, first interview)

*...in those busy periods, it’s not something you think so much about, but my automatic responses to clients are strength-based responses and solution focused as well…* (Nina, final interview)

They agreed theory and knowledge is ever present and underpins intervention, albeit unconsciously at times. This raises questions about how knowledge and theory is at the forefront of newly qualified social workers’ identities and lived experience, which includes everyday decision-making.

Belinda and Maggie were exceptions in relation to using and developing theory. Belinda described how she lacked opportunities to apply, reflect and grow in her use of theory; her focus was on surviving the toxic environment of her organisation. Maggie detailed how she was constrained by her position and did not have the opportunity to practise as a social worker and thereby apply theory in a meaningful way. Despite this, theory – particularly a strengths perspective – was important to them both.

**Doing as a Social Worker**

Participants described communication, including dress and physical presence, as underlying ways of doing. Through their bodies (corporeality), social work identity could be expressed and acted upon in the world. Like use of knowledge and theory, most participants described that their ways of doing developed over the course of the year: “Yeah, I’m better at asking questions now than what I was six months ago...” (Chelsea, second interview); “Maybe they’ve just become more integrated because I don’t think of them so much as skills any more. I just think of it as doing the job...” (Claire, final interview).
The most important skill set participants described was communication, both verbal and non-verbal. They detailed how social workers need to be able to communicate effectively across a range of contexts so they can build and maintain relationships:

*I would put it down to people skills is probably the main [skills]; obviously it covers a whole broad…umbrella because even within the team, we work with other allied workers, therapists and it’s about how do we relate with those people to be able to convince and to respectfully work well together to achieve best outcomes. So to me, I think it’s really important that we are mindful about the way we maintain those relationships because sometimes it’s not only about the client but it’s also about how do we work as a multidisciplinary team…* (Rueben, second interview)

In terms of verbal communication, all participants referred to the importance of microskills based on empathic communication and effective questioning. They stated that the use of microskills can be enough for effective intervention, as one provides a safe and quiet space for service participants to talk, reflect and allow insights to emerge: “... we’re like a whiteboard; [clients] they’re too close to the situation. So you sort of help them to step back and look at what’s going on and make sense of it...” (Damon, final interview).

However, several participants acknowledged divergences between theory and practice, where sometimes all focus was on theory, at the cost of practice, or they undertook practice without acknowledging the theory behind it.

Non-verbal communication through body language was also emphasised. This included having a calm, engaging and attentive physical presence that can effectively influence a situation: “Someone has to be in control... and not control of the situation but controls themselves so you’re not bringing your own ‘oh my godness’ into the room” (Cass, second interview).

Here Cass was referring to ensuring her personal and professional aspects of self were mediated through managing her presence during a crisis.
Five participants also reflected on dress as a physical expression of identity. Cass was one of the five participants who reflected on this experience:

I drive half an hour in the car to work on my own and I have make-up on and my hair’s done and I’m dressed hopefully nicely, and I step into work and people are, oh, that’s Cass, she’s the sexual assault counsellor here… (Cass, second interview)

Dress can send a message to others about oneself:

...over here [remote region], it’s a bit more casual; some of the attitudes and approaches to things leave a lot to be desired sometimes...the dress code kicks everything off; because it’s so hot, most people [are] just getting around in anything. And it’s nothing to show up to a meeting and people look like they’ve just rolled off the beach; whereas people are more formally dressed in other areas of Australia… (Gary, final interview)

...all the families are really intimidated by her [a manager] and they tell us that...and because she always wants to dress really professionally. And like in my role at [another location] I dressed... we dressed casually because it was ridiculously hot, but also because you wouldn’t have engaged with the families. (Belinda, second interview)

These participants agreed that dress needs to be contextual just like verbal communication. Claire intervened through dress on field placement, when she designed and created a personalised T-shirt for her social work team: “...And they wore them occasionally. But I tell you what, whenever we wore them, doctors and nurses and patients would ask us about what we do” (Claire, first interview).

Claire described this as a powerful act, where dress was used for expressing a professional identity and changing a negative organisational culture by being able to explain to others what social workers really do.

**Discussion**

For the participants, their post-qualification period meant articulating what it means to be, know/think, and do as a social worker. It meant enacting the values, ethics, knowledge, theory and skills they had developed during their study. The participants’
descriptions of social work identity reveal what Dutton et al. (2009) call the “narratives that are claimed by or attributed to an entity, helping to define what it is and what it is not” (p. 4). In this study, the participants detailed their core and shared beliefs and values that expressed a social work view of the world. Participants’ descriptions also reinforced their lived experience of transition and adjustment as they deeply reflected on social work to clarify, consolidate and settle into their professional identity.

In terms of being, the participants embraced being values driven and had a strong affiliation with the qualification and the Australian social work code of ethics. Many of their motivations to join social work reflected similar altruistic ideals of social work students from an earlier UK study (Stevens et al., 2012). In my study, the participants revealed a shared belief and passion in working with people to improve their quality of life, especially through people making their own decisions wherever possible. Their professional identity was informed by their perceptions of professionalism, where social work provides an important structure and pathway to achieving change. Completing a specific social work qualification complemented these structures; to be called a social worker, one must not only go through the journey of study but also then emerge and consciously practise what the profession aims to achieve. The participants reinforced all dimensions as part of enacting a professional identity. They acknowledged the presence and influences of other dimensions, such as their role and their organisation, but most maintained a strong affiliation with their professional identity. Some further investigation would be necessary to clarify why they made that choice, but it perhaps relates to their emphasis on personal and professional fit; where those aspects of self came together and were a fundamental part of who they were as a professional.

The participants captured some of the ongoing tensions in social work between social change and social control roles. Within neo-conservative environments, social workers are increasingly expected to work with individuals who are seen to cause their own problems. Marston and McDonald (2012) are concerned that such expectations may cause confusion for newly qualified social workers, who may enter practice with a commitment to social change work but will experience a different reality. This is a possibility for participants in my study, who all were employed in micro (individual) level roles. While they approached situations with a multidimensional mindset, it was not clear whether many of them were able to
contribute to social change. Participants indicated they mediated some of this through a commitment to being critically reflective, so they accounted for how they responded to situations and incorporated new knowledge over time. However, job roles and boundaries constrained how much of a multidimensional approach could be enacted at the micro-level. This indicates a need to examine the impacts of socio-cultural influences on professional identity.

In terms of knowing/thinking, the participants drew from diverse sources of knowledge as eclectic practitioners. The social work profession itself has evolved by drawing on theory and knowledge from various disciplines, as well as developing its own, as captured in the current international definition (International Federation of Social workers [IFSW], 2014). Participants reflected this eclecticism in their own use of theory and knowledge, and reinforced that it was an important part of being a professional, and their own development during the first 12 months post-qualification. However, by drawing on diverse theories, it was not clear how participants navigated frameworks with differing worldviews about the causes of problems, and how their choice of theory corresponded with their underlying ontology. They argued it was important for knowledge and theory to be consistent with what they valued and believed, such as what would work with clients, but how did they make that decision in the moment? It is also interesting that several participants practised without having much space to reflect on their use of theory. Participants suggested theory was ever present, but this would need to be scrutinised further to consider possible separation between theory and practice. These experiences encourage further investigation into use of knowledge and theory during the initial post-qualification period, including eclectic practice and how it unfolds in everyday decision-making.

Despite the various contexts the participants were employed in, fundamental verbal and non-verbal communication skills, especially basic micro-skills, were crucial to doing as a social worker. These skills transcended where and who the participants worked with, which supports the importance of having generic fundamental skills as emphasised by supervisors in Luxembourg (Engelberg & Limbach-Reich, 2016). The participants’ descriptions of doing correspond with the phenomenological perspective that the human body is the primary way in which people exist, function and act in the world. As Cameron and McDermott (2007) emphasise, the mind and body are part of the whole body; two sides of the same coin. Participants stated they undertook
interventions through the use and management of their whole “self” such as through dress and the presence they brought to influence a situation. There are also similar sentiments between participants in my study and those in Scholar’s (2012), who explored dress as an important part of expressing values.

Finally, uncovering participants’ descriptions of social work identity through the dimensions of *being, knowing/thinking* and *doing* were useful. Several participants commented on their familiarity with the concepts of *being, knowing/thinking* and *doing* from their university study. These concepts were featured throughout their studies as a way of emphasising how social workers must be self-aware, be able to draw on knowledge, and be able to utilise skills to achieve goals and purposes of the profession. Applying these concepts has provided insight into participants’ ways of existing in the world as a social worker. It would be worth developing this model further and exploring it in greater depth to understand how newly qualified social workers consolidate and clarify their professional identity. For example, while participants reinforced that there should be congruence between aspects of *being, knowing/thinking* and *doing*, it is not clear whether that did occur in their everyday practice. Some participants described examples where there might have been contradictions including separation between theory and practice.

**Chapter Summary**

Throughout the year the participants explored what it meant to be, think and do as a social worker as part of their lived experience of professional identity. The participants detailed how personal and professional aspects of self came together to express a whole identity, which they used to view situations, draw on knowledge and act in the world. Their professional identities were dynamic and fluid, and were informed strongly by external reference points to social work such as university study and the Australian code of ethics. So what exactly happened in order for the participants to be able to explore, articulate and foster their professional identity?
Chapter 9

Lived Experience that Fosters and Erodes Professional Identity at the Individual (Micro) Level

Over the next three chapters, I will focus on the second research question of my study, which is about fostering and eroding professional identity. Each chapter will concentrate on a specific layer of lived experience: individual/micro (Chapter 9); relationships and organisations/meso (Chapter 10); and environmental contexts/macro (Chapter 11). In this chapter, I will begin with the micro dimension (Figure 14), which details how the participants were committed to their own growth and development as active learners, which was informed by their education, time and experience, and building their confidence.

![Figure 14. Micro dimensions which foster and/or erode professional identity.](image)
Impacts of Education

The participants’ journey of growth and development was first informed by the impacts of their education. All participants said that university study changed them personally and professionally. They described their studies as being transformative, especially in becoming critically reflective of their own history and context:

But I guess the way that we were asked to reflect was something I’d never been asked to do before; I’ve never been asked to reflect, and be aware of my own history that informs my values, my beliefs, my perspectives; I’d never been asked to be aware of my own agenda. (Isabella, first interview)

For Isabella her transformative journey began during diploma studies at TAFE, and then continued into her university degree at CSU.

Eight participants reflected on their disposition before they undertook social work study, and then on their character after qualification. They noticed that their worldview, values and overall identity had changed. For example, Geraldine gained a lot of development from previous studies and experiences, but found her social work degree gave her a specific professional identity, and increased her self-awareness and professionalism:

I still go off on tangents, I know that, but I think I pull myself back faster...I wear my emotions on my sleeve. I know that...I mean we talked about toolboxes [at uni] ... I think it [my education] has given me some resources to be able to process things...In a much more productive way. (Geraldine, first interview)

An educational activity that had a particularly profound impact was field placement, also known as practical learning. All participants agreed field placement was a fundamentally important part of their study, especially for enabling theory to “come alive” in practice, learning from experienced practitioners, developing networks for future practice and, finally, professional identity formation: “And I think prac is one of those things you stretch the boundaries of what you’re currently doing, and you really do get out of your comfort zone...” (Michael, first interview); “I really enjoyed that five months to be able to really go into something with depth...” (Catherine, first interview).
Undertaking two placements was considered ideal by most participants because one can gain sufficient practical experience:

...I'm very grateful that in social work we have such long pracs. I know it's a pain to be working for nothing, and it's very hard sometimes, but I just can’t imagine any better way to do it. It’s just so valuable. (Claire, final interview)

A few participants wondered if further earlier placements could be beneficial:

I think that people should do a short placement first and second year...because there’s so much growth in a placement, even a two-week mentor in the first year; go into an organisation and shadow a social worker for two weeks. I don’t know – that would have benefitted me; we can be more understanding about social work practice in the real world. (Julia, final interview).

It is noteworthy that Claire and Julia reflected on the relevance of placements in their final interviews. Even after leaving university for some time, the importance of their education endured, and field placement experiences were important to them.

Chelsea, Maggie and Isabella highlighted that two placements provided for another opportunity if one was not sufficient for learning, or did not go well: "In hindsight, I think that I could have done, because my second placement...my clinical placement was so intensive and I did a lot...I realise, I think, how little I did in my first one” (Isabella, first interview).

Catherine and James observed other students who emerged with less confidence and ability to transition when their field placements did not go well – for example:

...and talking to other people who’ve been on placement, I can see they had bad experiences, and a lot of that was to do with professional integrity and professional ability of the people they were on placement with and under, and it can have a big impact on your own career and your own ability to do good work, and you know your own self-esteem or vicarious trauma… (Catherine, first interview)

Fourteen participants, most of whom were mature aged and had prior experience in the field, said that overall, university education created a foundation for building their professional identity: “…it’s only foundational what you’re learning, and you realise
how foundational it is... It [study] kind of integrates into a silent subconscious identity” (Catherine, second interview).

The participants emerged from study with a sense of who they were and who they wanted to be, which informed their lived experience of transition and adjustment, especially regarding their professional identity. For Belinda, having a foundation, which she described as her core, assisted her to remain committed to the profession when experiencing erosion of professional identity during the year:

[my core is] ... my education and knowledge, and what I believe social work is; how I integrate that with the principles at work and also [with] my own beliefs and things like that...social work has always sort of integrated really well with my own personal beliefs and it’s still there and I still... when, like, I’m using it in my practice, but I don’t feel like I’m as connected or it’s as strong as I’d like it to be. (Belinda, second interview)

Most participants said that completing university was not an end, but a new chapter of learning and development:

I’ve got a good concrete base of my house of knowledge, and that’s what I think the degree is, and that’s all it is. It’s not the house; it’s not the house that [Michael] built – it’s the foundation, and so what I will add to it now...

(Michael, second interview)

These descriptions are similar to other studies, where participants reported on the effectiveness of their degrees, and reinforces that education is developmental (Bates et al., 2010; Nix et al., 2009); social work study provides a springboard for them to jump into practice and swim.

The importance of field education in the development of professional identity is also highlighted in other studies, including the need for reliable learning activities to get the most out of placement (Cleak et al., 2016b; Smith et al., 2014; Wong & Pearson, 2007). Participants’ emphasis on having two placements is interesting to compare with Tham and Lynch’s (2014) study in Sweden, where there was only one placement, and students reported they were less prepared for the field (Tham & Lynch, 2014). Also, participants in my study did not appear to place less value on field placement over time as found by Zeira and Schiff (2014) in Israel. For some, the value of placement became even stronger in their later interviews.
Lived Time and Experience (Temporality)

The participants entered the post-qualification period informed by their previous studies, but these were not the only factors that influenced their journey at the individual (micro) level. Lived time and experience were described as important elements of fostering professional identity during the first-year post qualification period. As van Manen (1997) states, time is experienced as the past, present and future. These concepts were readily applicable to participants’ descriptions of their life and field experience (past), which informed who they were in their current life stage (present). Both the past and present influenced their future, where gaining experience was described as a fundamental part of fostering identity.

In terms of their past, seven participants reflected on the contribution of their previous life experiences, which informed who they had become. Cass came to recognise during her post-qualification period that her life experience was a strength, especially when she had little field experience to draw upon: “... [ask yourself], how can you then use your life experience, whether you’re 20 or whether you’re 40, to assist you in finding work...” (Cass, final interview).

Thirteen participants came to social work study and practice with a range of prior field experiences in the human services sector. They all agreed their backgrounds were useful for integrating theory and practice during university study, building confidence, increasing preparedness for practice, and fostering professional identity: “...I could apply some of the theories we had learnt in class, and I could contribute in class...contributing practical experiences that I would have experienced within the field” (Rueben, first interview).

Eight participants then reflected on the fluidity of professional identity and how it responded to their present life stage:

So I think identity can change depending on what stage of...where you are in your position of your job. Especially, if you’re starting a new job...you’re trying to find your feet...Depending on where you are in your life cycle of work, career, what type of job you’re in. (Maggie, first interview)

For those who came to social work as mature-aged students, age was seen as an advantage in their current life stage, and they appreciated studying later in life:
I think age is a skill in some ways...if I look at myself when I was younger, I was more reactive...and I would [want to] fix things quickly and I would [want to], you know, A, B, C, and then move on to the next thing, whereas my perspective now is that I’m better able to pace myself...I’ve kind of changed from the sprinter to the marathon runner. (Catherine, first interview)

This emphasises personal dimensions of identity that other studies have raised (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016; Valutis et al., 2012); people are influenced by who they personally are in the present.

In relation to the future, most participants identified that in order to foster their professional identity, they needed more time and experience in the field. Both dimensions were emphasised as being important together. For example, until he gained a position, Damon had time but little practical experience as a social worker, which stalled his growth and development. In contrast to this, Gary talked about needing more time to build experience in his new social work role.

At the beginning of the year, 10 participants looked forward to gaining experience and anticipated that it would foster their professional identities:

I feel like I have an idea of what social work is; I feel like I have an idea of how I would like to be a social worker; I just don’t feel like I’ve had an opportunity yet to fully do that. And I’m sort of really excited about starting full time and having a really large client load… (Nina, first interview)

During interviews two and three, 12 participants confirmed that time and experience had been crucial for fostering their professional identities:

...like it’s a really good base job, but – and when I say base job it’s getting all the experiences and, like, the foundation stuff that I haven’t had because I haven’t worked ever – I’ve got all the theory and theory is awesome, but you know, more experience with clients… (Chelsea, second interview)

...there is this level of patience you have to give yourself in that first year because you – as I said, you don’t know yourself in the role of a social worker until you’ve done it; you can’t pretend; you can’t simulate that experience, and I don’t think you really know if you can do it until you do it. (Michael, final interview)
The journey was not a passive process; the participants perceived themselves to be active learners and reflectors, which helped them to gain the most value from their experiences.

Awareness and self-perceptions of being newly qualified were also integral components of gaining experience. Fourteen participants described themselves as newly qualified during all three of their interviews. Some believed that the first two years, post-qualification, were significant, whereas the first year was a new phase of learning: “… [In] one year you’ve just got your head around your job in our field, especially where I am and then I’d like to have a year of consolidation” (Julia, second interview).

The most common descriptors the participants used to describe themselves were “learner” and “beginner” – someone early in their social work career who needs further growth and development:

...Well it [being newly qualified] means that you’ve got limited experience, I think, and you have to be able to recognise that you’ve got limited experiences and limited skills and be able to get access to more professional people who have skills that you don’t have; that’s what it means… (Catherine, second interview)

This matches how they described their university study as a developmental process.

Rueben used the phrase “baby social worker” in all his interviews. Maggie also described how being newly qualified can be like “being busted back to kindergarten…” (first interview). After experiencing erosion of identity, Maggie later reflected: “I think I’m back in preschool now...” (second interview). These descriptions evoke images of childhood development, where the participants had energy and a need for nurturing and growth that should be balanced with rest (self-care). It also suggests they needed some level of monitoring, direction and support as they became accustomed in an unfamiliar territory, and grew from “baby social worker” to “grown-up social worker”.

Several participants cautioned to be careful about unhelpful perceptions, which may hold one back. For example, Rueben acknowledged while he saw himself as a “baby social worker”, he was quite capable of taking on complex cases sooner than he
expected. Rueben advised other newly qualified practitioners to be mindful of how they see themselves:

...it is a very exciting challenge but [do] not...expect things to be smooth flowing because obviously you are still settling into the role...at the same time [it is] not scary that much...be mindful that things might not turn out the way you perceive them, particularly with my experience of getting all these complex cases when I am...still thinking I am only a baby social worker...[take those] challenges as positives as well...say there must be something in me that is making these things happen...(Rueben, first interview)

Rueben raised the fine balance between throwing new workers into the deep end, as the literature so often describes (Bates, et al., 2010; Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Fook et al., 2000), and being restrained by one’s own perceptions. It was important to be open to trying unexpected experiences as an active learner who embraces challenges.

A disadvantage to these perceptions of being newly qualified is that providing best practice to clients is not always possible because learning and gaining experience are still taking place:

I think if you are just new and you are out of university, unfortunately, your clients are probably at a bit of a deficit because it’s going to take you a long time to start to really get a skill base that’s fairly profound and able to meet all their needs. (Catherine, final interview)

Catherine said there was very little to be done about this because you have to take the time to gain the experience and knowledge. She reinforced the message that studying can only take one so far and a major part of the post-qualification journey is experiential learning in the field. As such, the participants reiterated that it was important for emerging practitioners to actively learn, be able to seek out information, and have structured support in order to gain experience and give clients the best possible service at that point in time.
In contrast to most participants, three of them did not perceive themselves as newly qualified social workers. Vivienne never saw herself as newly qualified because she had over 20 years of experience in the field. Instead her sense of “feeling new” related to entering a new job role, learning new systems and adjusting to being in a team:

...being in a government system, and following strict guidelines and policies, all that type of thing, has been very new and...a big transition even though I was working in, well, for the government in the other role and other jobs I’ve held. (Vivienne, final interview)

At their second interviews, Claire and Michael said they no longer saw themselves as newly qualified:

I don’t feel like a newly qualified social worker any more...I acknowledge that I don’t know everything, but I think when I’ve been a social worker for 20 years, I will still acknowledge I don’t know everything. (Claire, second interview)

I don’t feel like a newly qualified – I’m going to be amassed with some new information. No, it’s all about doing the job, thinking in the job and growing for me, and I probably now need to realise it has to be the other way around – [that] is, I have to be myself in the role; think my way through processes and then do it. (Michael, second interview)

For Claire, working hard and completing her initial orientation period over the first three to six months were described as important stepping stones towards no longer perceiving herself as newly qualified. For Michael, his prior 12 years of experience in the field and current role were important for shedding the title “newly qualified”. Nonetheless, like all the other participants, Vivienne, Claire and Michael agreed growth and development were important elements of their journey, and they needed to gain further experience.

**Confidence in Social Work Identity**

Having described themselves as learners who needed time and experience, this section details how the participants engaged in the process of learning to build their confidence. In each interview, participants rated confidence in their social work identity on a scale from 1 to 10 (see Appendix E) – 1 being no confidence and 10
being great confidence. It was not a quantitative scale but a question to prompt critical reflection and exploration of lived experience.

Most participants experienced growth and development in their confidence over the course of their first 12 months post-qualification period. Specifically, five experienced a steady increase over time (Cass, Claire, Isabella, Michael and Jessica); five had a slight increase over time (Damon, Rueben, Gary, Nina and Catherine); three remained at a similar level (James, Chelsea and Vivienne); two experienced a decrease (Belinda and Maggie), and two were irregular (Geraldine and Julia). Geraldine and Julia were irregular because they rated their identities slightly lower in later interviews. However, the change in their scale did not reflect a decline in confidence in social work identity:

... [you are on] a little bit of a high because you get your piece of paper...and I think you’re still floating on that a little bit and that sense of achievement that I did it, I finished, I’ve got the piece of paper to prove it. (Geraldine, second interview)

...I wouldn’t put me at 6 now, I’d put me at 4 for confidence...because again it goes back to that – well, I’ve realised I need more depth to my knowledge; I realised to be a good advocate, you need to know your stuff… (Julia, final interview)

Geraldine noted how her scale was readjusted after reflecting on the influence of completing study. With more time, reflection and experience, Geraldine later realised where her professional identity was located. This was similar to Julia, who had grown significantly over the year but needed more depth of knowledge. Both experiences are a reminder of Moffatt and Miehls’ (1999) discussion of how identity is fluid and renegotiated as new experiences occur. Hence, it is worthwhile to explore identities over a period of time.

Those who experienced growth and development emphasised that they did not rate themselves 10/10 because there was always more to learn. The participants again emphasised their commitment to lifelong learning and not being complacent: “I would say about a 7. Just because I feel like I’m kind of comfortable where I’m at, but I think, I’ve still got lots to learn...” (Nina, final interview).
With this in mind, how did the participants build their confidence? Three dimensions were detailed – learning; personal growth and development; and expressing identity (Figure 15).

**Figure 15.** Dimensions of building confidence.

**Learning as part of building confidence.** The first dimension of building confidence for the participants involved learning a range of lessons within professional, organisational and client contexts. Professional lessons included becoming increasingly self-aware of strengths and areas for development as a social worker, developing their personal style, learning about job seeking, and managing professional self-care. Many of these professional lessons were contextual to individual circumstances and so varied in terms of when they were resolved. Nonetheless, with the exception of job seeking, the other lessons generally took six to 12 months to be achieved.

Four participants said that realising there was so much more to learn after university study was a particularly important part of their professional learning journey:

> ... I was hit with such a big realisation about how much I didn’t know...And how little my degree actually gave me in terms of practical work, in terms of being in the field...it’s a great beginning but it is only the beginning. (Julia, final interview)
Even though the participants regarded university study as developmental, they realised it was important as qualified social workers that they embrace lifelong learning.

In terms of job seeking, Damon had to learn how to successfully apply for a position. Like Cass, it impacted on him when he was struggling to get a social work job, but he learned to focus on the positives:

*Yeah it was sort of like a confidence boost that at least I am interviewing well now – [I] sort of went from not interviewing well and having an all right interview, and then getting on the eligibility list...* (Damon, second interview)

There is a sense of gaining some recognition as a potential social worker here that could have positive impacts on professional identity.

Professional lessons also included experiencing successful outcomes, which taught the participants what worked well in practice. Eleven participants gained confidence when they experienced positive outcomes in their work with clients and colleagues. Experiencing a successful outcome built a sense of competence and proficiency:

“I’ve had some really good outcomes so far, and that fosters, and sets an identity here that we offer something very different [as hospital social workers]” (James, first interview).

Here James reiterated how successful outcomes boosted his confidence, which then helped with clarifying his distinct identity. This remained an important part of fostering his identity across the whole year.

For the participants, it was meaningful to receive direct, respectful and ongoing feedback from clients, colleagues or managers, to confirm successful outcomes, and what they were learning. Gaining this feedback fostered professional identity as their social work practice came to life and brought about a positive change within them. Sometimes, however, it was not about the outcome; it was about the journey and doing the best one can at that point in time:

*I think I appreciate the journey more than the outcome because I can see the development in the person.* (Chelsea, second interview)
There maybe not be that many successes and they may end up being few and far between as the years go by, but I feel like for [one client] in her circumstances and what she went through I’ve done the best… (Catherine, final interview)

Other studies have uncovered growth in confidence over time – for example, Jack and Donnellan (2010) – especially as newly qualified social workers gain experience and a sense of proficiency (Carpenter et al., 2015). Experiences in my study were found to be similar but it is unique to focus specifically on how professional identity can be consolidated and fostered through these lessons and successful outcomes. As participants in my study developed their confidence, their professional identity also grew.

Organisational lessons included orientation in the workplace and wider community, and gaining role clarity over time. Orientation lessons were generally resolved during the first three to six months, depending on how long a participant was in their job, or the complexity of their organisation. Other organisational lessons were about managing professional relationships and culture, which included how to effectively collaborate with colleagues and team members, manage conflict, and work within the wider organisational culture or systems. For many, it took six to 12 months to become more confident and resolve these organisational issues, which coincides with the findings detailed in Chapter 7 and the findings in other studies on transition and development (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Fook et al., 2000; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004).

In terms of client lessons, participants described figuring out how to exercise power in a responsible way with clients and become comfortable with the realisation that not all clients will like social workers:

*I’ve got clients now that really dislike me...when you experience that for the first couple of times and not everybody likes you, it doesn’t matter what age you are, that’s an experience you go through, and that’s been a really, really empowering curve because I’ve got situations where that’s happened now, and people have really hated the social worker for interfering and being a busybody...I’ve grown in my confidence to say, my priority is what it is…*(Michael, first interview)

Michael revealed personal dimensions to his learning, and how he had to grow in order to become more confident and resolve fears about clients disliking him.
A major client lesson related to embracing uncertain aspects of practice such as not having all of the answers. Twelve participants found they had to learn how to seek answers, rather than have them, be flexible with clients, and accept that not everything can be fixed. At the beginning of the year, some participants felt a need to “know everything” or be able to “fix things” when working with clients. These participants were also interested in “doing things right”, some of which reflects Jeffery’s (2007) findings with new graduates, who emphasised having fixed answers and wanting a level of certainty in practice. However, participants in my study described how they had a strong sense of professional responsibility to provide the best service: “...I take social work practice as a big responsibility; my job’s a big responsibility; I don’t take it lightly...” (Julia, second interview).

There were some commonalities with wider literature when participants wanted to enact their perceptions of good (right) social work (Harré Hindmarsh, 1992), not be acculturated into bad practices (Agllias, 2010) and meet the expectations of their employers (Fenge, 2013):

*The other challenge is making my social work practice – because I’m only a new grad and...I’m surrounded by extraordinary practitioners; these women are amazing social workers, and they’re so fluid in their theories, they’re so – you know, they use the models, they’re right there, so I’m impatient; I want to be as good as them.* (Julia, final interview)

There was no indication that participants operated without values at times, which Fook et al. (2000) found with participants in their earlier Australian study. Instead, participants in my study described a desire to meet the high standards of their organisation and perceptions of professionalism.

As part of learning to embrace uncertainty, six participants said making a mistake or being part of a critical incident with clients could erode their professional identity: “...maybe...if someone was to suicide, for instance. While you’re responsible, working with them, that sort of thing” (Vivienne, first interview); “Probably a monumental failure in something would take it down [laughs]. I mean there’s going to be a time when you fail” (Catherine, second interview).

Julia (second interview) built on this by being mindful of “...not having the expectation of getting it right every time...”. It was recognised there needs to be
balance in accepting that mistakes can happen, which became an important professional lesson.

Only Claire experienced a critical incident that temporarily impacted on her professional identity because it led to her questioning whether she could do her job: “I certainly wouldn’t have been an 8 [on identity scale] when I was doubting whether I could do the job. So it has gone down” (Claire, final interview).

Taking leave to reassess her work and self-care practices was beneficial for growth and development, which then fostered her professional identity.

As the year unfolded, the participants came to learn that it was more important to be able to seek out answers, know the limits of what they could do, and accept the reality of mistakes:

...When a woman sits in front of me, I’ve got to know my stuff, man, like, I’m honest and often women will give me stuff, and I’m like, oh, I’m really glad you shared that with me. I’m not sure what I can do with that one. I just need to step out of the room for a minute, and I’m just going to ring my team leader because that really needs special care and that needs me to respond in a really special way for you, so can you just give me a minute, and I’ll leave. (Julia, second interview)

I feel like it’s being true to myself – it’s being true to my clients and it works for me...in my mistakes as well – you know I can easily say to a client I have bugged that up you know. We will have to do that again... (Claire, final interview)

Learning to embrace uncertainty complemented their perceptions of professionalism, where one is not the domineering expert with all of the answers. Over time, the participants, like those in Kearns and McArdles’ (2011) study in Scotland, described embracing discomfort and being more flexible with clients:

Yeah they change on me and I go all right where are we going now, rather than uh-oh, I have to be in control. I can give up that control to them and say all right, well, where are we going to go and how can we sort this out together because I still don’t know. There is still a lot of knowledge and experience I need behind me. So I suppose it’s then getting the client to really take the lead
and going with what that is and admitting to the client, well, I don’t know. Let’s try and figure this out together. (Cass, final interview)

Cass described how she let go of initial ideas about being the “all-knowing professional”, which aligned better with her ideals of social work. After six to 12 months, many of the participants had more confidence, developed their personal style, shaped their role, and were able to embrace client self-determination and elements of uncertainty in practice.

**Personal growth and development as part of building confidence.** The second dimension participants described as part of building their confidence was personal growth and development. Aspects of personal development included self-concept and self-esteem, and drawing on their strengths to develop their identities.

Central to identity is the concept a person constructs to determine who they are (self-concept), which Kearns and McArdle (2011) explored in their study with newly qualified social workers. When interviewed, all of the participants in my study described their personal self-concept, which included how it had changed and evolved over time because of their commitment to learning and development. For most, their self-concept grew in positive ways as a result of gaining experience and confidence: “I stretch and I’m conscious I want to be the best I can be, and so my dominant story is about me reaching and challenging myself and trying hard and commitment and dedication…” (Julia, second interview).

In addition to self-concept, five participants (Cass, Nina, Damon, Michael and Isabella) talked about self-esteem, and how it improved over the course of the year. An ideal example was Cass, who began the year with little self-esteem but grew significantly over time: “[7/10 identity scale means] Self-esteem to start off with, yes I can do it, I do have skills, I do have knowledge, identifying what I do already bring with me to the role” (Cass, second interview); “…my self-esteem has improved as well of course with all my confidence…” (Cass, final interview).

Cass recognised her own strengths as part of her personal growth and development. This was particularly important when struggling with job seeking: “…I just felt useless, worthless, it was horrible and it was only for a short period of time, but I felt because everything now is experience, they want the degree, but they want the experience with it” (Cass, second interview).
The struggles with job seeking that Cass, Damon and Maggie experienced suggest how work can have an important relationship to developing a social work identity. When Cass and Damon later gained their positions, they described being able to grow and develop as a social worker.

All participants described using their own strengths to foster professional identity. Their strengths informed their self-concept and self-esteem throughout the year:

... I think my confidence has grown and that’s really important to me because I’m the sort of person that is cautious...I assume I know less rather than I know more. And so it’s good to be able to feel like I am on the right track… (Nina, final interview)

...like I haven’t found myself getting stressed out by – some people say how do you deal with the stories you hear? I’m like yeah, there’s...I don’t know why. I don’t ignore them, but I don’t take them home with me. (Damon, final interview)

...if there’s an issue I address it, yeah, and sort it, work around it if I can’t fix it. And that’s, it’s interesting you say that because the manager has commented on that, and she said something along the lines of “I like the way that you are proactive and deal with things when they come up.” (Vivienne, final interview)

Participants’ strengths did not sit in isolation but were part of lifelong learning and achieving personal growth and development: “[I had] willingness to engage in the whole process not as an observer but as a participant...your own self-development can’t really be separated off from your professional development” (Claire, final interview).

Several participants talked about acquiring new strengths during the year:

Maybe I’m a little bit more assertive than I thought I was; that’s starting to build; I can feel my assertiveness starting to improve which has been right down there with the self-esteem so, yeah, maybe that’s proof that I am becoming a little bit more assertive… (Cass, second interview)

...I am not letting it [a negative workplace] get to me, and also, too, like a lot of things I could take quite personally. A lot of things that have been done to me
or have been said to me or written to me or what not – I could have taken that personally, and I could have started to question my practice… (Jessica, second interview)

Jessica utilised her strengths of observation, perseverance and critical reflection to face organisational challenges. While Jessica’s performance was criticised by management, she received constructive and positive feedback from colleagues and clients throughout the year. Jessica remained open about her performance but also critically reflected on the organisational culture and took notice of how structural issues were ignored and individuals were blamed for work issues. Jessica continually worked on her ability to de-personalise criticisms that were not constructive and consistent with various sources of feedback. This helped with professional self-care, where Jessica talked about separating work and home life.

For Belinda and Maggie, their self-concept and esteem deteriorated during the year because they were unable to be social workers. By the final interview, they described themselves as survivors in acknowledgement of their strength to survive attacks in their workplace, recover from their experiences and move on to a new journey:

I was saying to my mum the other day when I found out I got the [new] job … I said I feel like a survivor…if they write a farewell card I want them to say congratulations, you survived. (Belinda, final interview)

I’ve survived – I’m a survivor – so pretty much that’s my mentality; if I can work there and survive it, I can do anything really; so if anything, it just made me a little bit more sort of harder in that sense [laughs] and a little bit more jaded… (Maggie, final interview)

These descriptions indicate both self-concept and self-esteem are interconnected and influence each other, especially in terms of fostering identity – how one sees oneself (self-concept) influences how one evaluates oneself (self-esteem), and vice versa. It is a reminder of Boyer (2008) exploring how one’s social work journey is not simply a professional experience, it has deeply personal dimensions. As such, these stories encourage self-awareness about one’s self-concept, self-esteem and strengths, and the role each can play in fostering professional identity. It complements sources that discuss the importance of resilience to thrive and mediate various challenges (An & Chapman, 2014; Kearns & Mc Ardle, 2011; Kinman & Grant, 2016).
Expressing professional identity as part of building confidence. The final dimension to building confidence was about expressing professional identity through affirmations and managing the relationship between a role identity and professional identity. Drawing on all previous dimensions of building confidence, the participants were able to become self-aware of their professional identity and actively pursue ways to express it, which further contributed to their confidence. Those who expressed their professional identity throughout the year described greater growth and development. Those who were unable to express their professional identity, (for example, Belinda and Maggie) described less growth and development over the year.

Affirmations. Six participants referred to fostering their professional identities through personal affirmations. These were individualised motivational phrases of encouragement which assisted them to express their social work identity. For example, during university study, Isabella would remind herself she is already a social worker:

*I actually told myself I already was one [a social worker] way before I was qualified, but I was like, I can do this because I am a social worker. In my heart, deep inside, I am a social worker; I am doing this; I am completing this, no questions asked. So I’m doing this assignment, and that was actually an affirmation tool I used in making that a reality. Not something that was off in the far distance, but if I made it a reality it was much more powerful.* (Isabella, first interview)

This helped to build professional identity and motivated Isabella to complete academic work, especially as a distance student in a rural location, which she described as isolating and challenging. However, once in the field, Isabella said it took her another six months to settle into her professional identity and feel comfortable identifying with others as a social worker. In light of this, it was important to keep exploring and affirming her professional identity.

In practice, Gary would regularly affirm his underlying commitment to social work:

*I still feel every day before I walk into that workplace, I say to myself: “This is about the customer. It’s not about me.” At the end of the day, I’m working for them not for myself or anything relative to me.* (Gary, second interview)
Throughout interviewing, he expressed the importance of working towards his ideal of social work, and this affirmation allowed him to maintain a focus on his professional identity, which guided his actions in a complex government setting. These affirmations facilitated self-awareness about core motivations for being a social worker, and how to then act within the world.

**Role identity versus social work identity.** It was important for the participants to be aware of the relationship between their job role and social work identities in order to navigate practice and express who they were. This began with recognising the impacts of their job title. Four participants (Claire, Gary, James and Michael) held social work-specific positions for most of the year. Cass also did in her first short contract, but then later moved into a position as a sexual assault counsellor, which was her main role during the year. Thirteen participants held generic positions, such as caseworker or support worker throughout the year, which correspond with the employment trends of other new graduates in Australia (Hawkins, et al., 2000). For many participants, this scenario raised an immediate tension in fostering professional identity, which they reflected on throughout the year:

*So I’m not actually hired as a social worker...I’m hired for my social work qualification...it’s becoming more and more prevalent that we don’t get hired as social workers...So where is that taking our profession? ... I’m proud to be a social worker. So I don’t hide behind it; I identify with it strongly.* (Julia, first interview)

Julia maintained this stance in all her interviews and detailed how her organisation was an integral part of valuing her professional identity and feeling that she could express it. Nonetheless, some participants wondered if their job title could be a risk to their professional identity:

*...because you’re not being referred to or described or acknowledged as a social worker, there’s a lot more internal work that you have to do to keep paddling to stay afloat in your identity as a social worker.* (Isabella, second interview)

The concerned participants were prompted to develop self-awareness and confidence in expressing their professional identity so it could be more visible in the external environment.
To express their professional identity, 12 participants talked about identifying as a social worker in everyday practice despite what their job title might be. They introduced themselves as a social worker, added “social worker” to their job title, and/or wrote it down on paperwork. These were explicit acts of naming oneself as a social worker, which increased external visibility of their professional identity. For Vivienne, this was also about being transparent with clients: “Because I think it’s good to see what type of discipline and core values that the worker has” (Vivienne, second interview).

For some participants, identifying as a social worker was dependent on the context, which Isabella reflected on in interviews two and three:

I can say it more easily now and often times in social situations I pick and choose how I introduce myself. If I don’t want to talk about work at all, I often say hi, I’m [Isabella], I’m an artist… (Isabella, final interview)

Over time, the participants discovered how their role identity and professional identity converged and/or diverged in various ways, and they came to reflect on how there were limitations to expressing the latter. For example, Chelsea talked about how being an advocate fitted with her social work identity but the tight funding requirements constricted aspects of her professional identity: “I suppose the only thing I miss is case management…you don’t get to the issue, you get to deal with the consequences of the issue, so to speak” (Chelsea, first interview).

This was a consistent theme for Chelsea throughout the year as she reflected on the challenges of balancing her role identity with her professional one, and it contributed to her decision, amongst others, to find another job. The boundaries of her job limited her capacity to fully undertake social work roles that she saw could benefit her client group.

Nine more participants, including those who were employed in social work positions, reflected on limitations within their current roles and how this can impact on the expression of a social work identity:

I’ve got a firmer idea of what we do here, and what we can and can’t do...The boundaries of what we do. One of the boundaries for us...around the medical ward...it’s an in-patient role...I don’t have the scope to follow up afterwards, to follow up once the patient’s gone, that’s not what I do. So I’ve got to do
everything I can whilst they’re here, but try and put everything in place that I possibly can. But once they've gone, well, that's it. And that's difficult because some of our more challenging cases you’d like to be able to follow up but that's not something that I can do. (James, second interview)

James’s comment could be indicative of clashes between the individualised biomedical discourse versus a holistic and multidimensional social work approach.

The participants said that if they could not express their professional identity, there was a risk of it eroding. Being unable to express identity could lead to feelings of helplessness and stagnation that could prevent growth and development and marginalise their social work identity. Rueben best described this during a meeting about a case, where his voice was not given ample opportunity to be heard:

*I felt helpless...I really felt okay, I’m a social worker but what does it mean? Even in my role as a case manager, take the social-worker perspective away am I really being effective in my role, and why did I actually attend to that reassessment at all in the first place? So it was some of those questions that I was pointing at in my own self to say honestly why, why, why.* (Rueben, second interview)

This experience became a catalyst for Reuben to find ways to express his professional identity in the future.

Many participants also found that their role duties usually focused on individual-direct work, which left little scope for multidimensional or social change practice. As such, it could be difficult to fully realise what it means to be a social worker. This is a reminder of the multiple influences that can converge on to identity, especially organisational contexts (Harrison & Healy, 2015). For many participants, identifying these role limitations over the course of the year was useful for developing self-awareness and then considering ways of expressing their professional identity. However, for Belinda, negativity over the year, including bullying and downplaying of her professional identity, constricted her ability to express who she was. This illustrates Cameron and Mc Dermott’s (2007) argument regarding limitations to human agency as people are influenced by their social environments.
Discussion

As individuals, the participants characterised their first 12 months post-qualification period as one of learning and building experience, like field placement during their study days. The participants drew on their internal points of reference such as their own strengths and abilities to grow and develop, which included their past and present experiences. Their perceptions of being newly qualified are consistent with the wider literature, where the participants saw themselves as burgeoning professionals (Le Maistre & Paré, 2004) who experienced a period of learning on the job (Cameron, 2003).

These experiences challenge views that privilege technical-rational work and expect new graduates to “hit the ground running”. Participants were not simply doing tasks competently; they had to learn their role and how to be a social worker over time, which required them to be active learners so they could foster their professional identity. These findings also echo some of those of Harrison and Healy (2015) by highlighting the experience of navigating between a narrower job-focused role and a broader social work professional identity. In contrast to the findings of Harrison and Healy (2015), participants in my study were keen to navigate their role and professional identities, especially the latter. This adds depth to the Australian knowledge base by highlighting diverse and positive perceptions of professional identity. At times the role identity and professional identity complemented each other, but not always. In light of the current trends in contemporary workplaces, the findings support calls in Australia to understand how newly qualified social workers form and express their professional identities (Healy et al., 2015).

Participants’ experiences of learning stand somewhat in contrast to Fook et al. (2000) who argue that some new graduates were too preoccupied with “doing things right” during their first year of practice. They were concerned that the participants were focused more on technical aspects of their work, at the expense of critical reflection. The experiences of participants in my study shed some further light on the phenomenon. Their intent was not simply to “do things right” as technical rational workers; the participants wanted to “do right” in terms of learning their role and fulfilling the ethics and values of the social work profession. The participants were in the process of consolidating, clarifying, and/or settling into their professional identity, so it is perhaps not surprising or concerning they would explore what it means to “do
things right” as a social worker. To them, being a social worker was a great responsibility, especially where there was a risk of causing harm to others. As such, “doing things right” was an important lesson during their early experiences because they were finding their way in living up to social work values and ethics and learning to embrace discomfort and uncertainty. These lessons also reflected how participants became more congruent over time with their social work mindset, which was based on client-centredness. Their experiences diverge from Jeffery’s (2007) concerns about new graduates in Canada having a fixed and certain identity that does not reflect anti-oppressive practice. In my study, participants entered practice wanting certainty, but as they became more confident and consolidated their professional identity over time, they could embrace a more fluid professional perspective, which better reflected what they believed social work to be about. They needed time and experience as an active learner to embrace uncertainty within practice.

The participants’ learning and development suggests that they were moving along the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model (Fook et al., 2000). They cast off structured aspects of decision-making and moved to a more fluid approach because of the experiences they had acquired. Fook et al. (2000) identify criticisms of the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model, questioning whether it captured the acquisition of expertise, while overlooking experience. In my study, the participants reinforced the latter; it was through experiential learning that expertise was gained over time. Acquiring knowledge and skill meant little without gaining experience and being critically reflective as Cameron (2003) advocates. Consequently, it is worth recognising experiential learning as a fundamental part of the post-qualification period.

It can also be argued that the participants did not simply “acquire” knowledge and skill in their first-year post-qualification period, which the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model is focused on. The participants’ education, especially their field placement and backgrounds, informed their acquisition of knowledge, skill and professional identity, which Campanini et al. (2012) also assert. Adams et al. (2006) found that students enter their study already with a sense of professional identity. The same can be argued here as the participants entered the field and consolidated their professional identity through everyday experience as active learners. With this in mind, if the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model is to be used in future social work literature, it could be beneficial to focus on development rather than “acquisition”, and incorporate lived experience of professional identity explicitly.
Finally, the differing perceptions of being newly qualified suggest this period may not be fixed in developmental terms. I have argued that the post-qualification period begins at the point of graduation and finishes 12 months later. In the wider literature, the first 12 months in a workplace appears to be the general starting point. In my study, three participants (Vivienne, Claire and Michael) said they were not newly qualified because of their prior experience in the field, or achieving milestones in their workplace, such as finishing orientation. In contrast to this, Geraldine, who had the same amount of prior experience as Vivienne, described herself as newly qualified throughout the year. For her there was a period of settling into and becoming confident in her professional identity; it was an entirely new experience for Geraldine. The various perceptions and definitions highlight how the term “newly qualified” has different meanings for different people and that the level of prior experience does not necessarily predict how people will define themselves.

Chapter Summary

Formal social work education is a fundamental part of student and practitioner development. A whole new journey of growth and development unfolds during the post-qualification period. The participants’ experiences suggest that it was not useful to consider them as finished products after leaving university, but to view them more as developing social workers, who can take individual responsibility for their growth and development as active learners. However, the chapter also indicated that as individuals the participants did not undertake this journey on their own; they required support from others to provide them with opportunities for growth and development.
Chapter 10

Lived Experience That Fosters and Erodes Professional Identity at the Relational and Organisational (Meso) Level

I have previously identified that ongoing support from others can impact the lived experience of professional identity. Chapter 10 explores those influences at the meso level in-depth through the theme of connectedness. At this level, the professional identity of the participants were fostered and/or eroded within relational and organisational contexts (Figure 16).

*Figure 16. Meso dimensions which foster and/or erode professional identity.*

The first part of this chapter discusses how participants experienced a collective identity and thrived through meaningful relationships. The second part of the chapter builds on those relational factors by exploring lived experience within team and organisational cultures. It will be shown that the meso layer broadens the perspective from the immediate individual participant to wider social connections that were crucial to their lived experience.
Collective Identity

Participants described how they fostered their professional identity by experiencing a collective identity with others, especially social workers, which was based on shared characteristics, including shared membership and language, and a shared mindset (like-mindedness). Ten participants talked about shared membership and language, where there was a sense of being a member of a social work group that has a common language. This membership and language fostered a sense of collective belonging and identity: “So there is that shared language and we [social work colleagues] talk about reflection, and I mentioned that to my [manager] today and she had no idea what I was talking about” (Geraldine, first interview).

Geraldine discussed this in all her interviews as a collective identity was a new experience for her despite many years in the human services sector:

...it [social work] actually has given me something to hang my coat up on, really; it’s a link to a broader network...I was talking earlier about the shared language which is really... to me... [prior to social work] we weren’t necessarily talking social worker shared language. (Geraldine, first interview)

...Shared language [and shared resources] ... and being able to talk about the resources and what’s out there and share ideas; and it’s not a threat, and I think that’s actually a nice thing, too. (Geraldine, second interview)

...we talked about shared language...I’m actually able to use the language.... let’s go back to the code of ethics.... (Geraldine, final interview)

Most of the 10 participants had positive experiences of shared membership and language that fostered their professional identity. Seven participants said they experienced a lack of connection to other like-minded social workers, which was a risk to their professional identity. Belinda and Rueben wanted more contact with social workers, especially earlier in the year when they were beginning to clarify and consolidate their professional identities. Michael talked about wanting to overcome isolation in rural practice by building connections:

...that’s a way to reduce the erosion [of identity] ... is to have other people that think the same way you do and collectively seek advice, information, support,
all those things…in a group setting, or one on one if you’ve got another person who does what you do… (Michael, first interview)

Later in the year, Michael helped start a local network of hospital social workers to foster connectedness:

And so we all get together and talk about hospital social work... we’ve only had the one meeting, but it started with me needing to get out to find other social workers, and I was feeling pretty remote, dislocated from other social workers because there just weren’t any. (Michael, second interview)

Although with time and geographical distance, it was difficult to maintain attendance.

In short, these participants needed further connectedness with social workers to experience a collective identity:

...the lack of networking with other social workers for me has been quite significant. So I’ve met some people along the way that I’ve met through work, but you do sort of miss because... I guess because you get that at, at university where everybody’s studying the same thing...so when you come into another environment where you might not, because even in other places I’ve worked there have always been social workers. So, I guess, I was fortunate in that regard, where you at least had one other person that’s done that training; you can talk about your different theories or your different ways of doing that, you’ve got somebody to bounce things off, whereas I haven’t had that. (Jessica, final interview)

Jessica highlighted how shared membership and language began in education, where one can be immersed in a social work environment. In the field it is then built through relationships in the immediate environment. However, one is dependent on the presence of other social workers and opportunities to build connections. For Jessica and Belinda, who both lived in capital cities, they did not have sufficient or quality contact with social workers, which contributed to their negative experiences over the year. Those in rural and regional locations had more connections with social workers, which is noteworthy considering rural practice can be isolating (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Green, 2003), although further investigation with a larger representative sample would be necessary to sufficiently compare rural and urban experiences.
A further consideration regarding shared membership and language was issues of exclusion. Being part of a social work group means others are excluded. While this is inevitable when articulating professional boundaries, it can impact connectedness with other workers. For example, across all interviews, Geraldine described animosity from her manager about social workers (her manager was not a social worker). There was a perception that the social workers in her agency were not recognised or valued at that level: “...as I’ve touched on that before, within my own workplace, it’s [social work] not acknowledged. It’s not recognised at all” (Geraldine, final interview).

While participants gained from being part of a social work collective, Geraldine’s comment indicates this could have other unintended drawbacks with people who are non-social work qualified.

Fifteen participants talked about experiencing a shared mindset or like-mindedness with other social workers, which fostered their professional identity:

…what also helps is that we have four social workers on our team...we wish to empower people ...we want social justice; we want the basic things that represent social work...we have that in common and there is that...camaraderie… (Vivienne, final interview)

The connection was based on shared beliefs, values, goals and understanding or as Maggie (first interview) said, social workers are on “...the same wavelength”.

Experiencing a collective identity, based on such shared characteristics, is important when faced with challenges in the workplace, rectifying practice issues and/or experiencing transition and adjustment. For example, Rueben talked about the significance of consulting with a familiar social worker when consolidating his professional identity: “…it was a good outcome for me and it was very supportive to me, it reinforced what I believed in and reinforced what I was thinking was the best course forward...” (Rueben, second interview); “… so it has also been very refreshing for me to just have social work perspective from my...other colleague” (Rueben, final interview).

The participants’ experiences have been similar to those of other new graduates who have said it is important to have a professional identity to face workplace demands
and issues (Campanini et al., 2012). Here, a sense of collectivity through a professional identity appears to have a protective and nurturing role. It not only provides a sense of shared values, knowledge and skill but strength in numbers. These experiences are also consistent with Harrison and Healy’s (2015) social work participants, who talked about an identity in shared values. In my study, participants were able to build on that by embracing their professional identity, which included seeking advice from experienced social workers to test out ideas in a nurturing relationship: “...she’s [my team leader] pretty clever, but she has grown in her role, which has allowed me a really safe place to learn” (Julia, final interview).

Julia later emphasised how that sense of safety helped her to build confidence and foster her professional identity.

A shared mindset is largely experienced and needed with social workers, but several participants raised broader relationships as also being relevant. For example, Claire highlighted like-mindedness with allied health colleagues:

   ... I feel comfortable in my role and I feel especially comfortable in my Allied Health office with the OT [occupational therapist], the OT assistant and the consumer consultant, and we are all of similar minds on things...because we all feel the same way about our patients and all, I think pretty much; I can safely say we all see them as just people who are going through a difficult time...I think we are all on the same page with that… (Claire, second interview)

Her description extends the experience of collective identity as involving a range of relationships so long as shared dimensions, such as like-mindedness, are present. Nonetheless, all 15 participants agreed that social work connections, whether they had them or not, were particularly important throughout the year: “... because I am the only social worker in the mental health unit, I do like to keep in touch with [other social workers]... I guess it’s really our values and our view of a client” (Claire, second interview).

This suggests finding and sharing commonalities between social workers and other colleagues could be a useful approach for new practitioners when they are consolidating their professional identity and building relationships during the post-qualification period. Rather than seeing possible differences between social workers
and other profession groups, it could be useful to establish common ground and shared characteristics.

**Meaningful Relationships**

This section explores the diverse personal and professional relationships that formed part of the participants’ wide networks and contributed to fostering their professional identities, through support and/or opportunities to develop. Besides supervision, all relationships were raised inductively by participants themselves when what fostered and/or eroded their social work identity was explored. In order of prevalence (how often they were discussed) their relationships with their managers, supervisors, personal relationships, networks, role models, mentors and lecturers were examined in their interviews.

**Managers.** Managers were most often discussed by participants throughout all their interviews. Managers were described as pivotal in influencing organisational culture and providing opportunities for growth and development. Eleven participants described having an overall good relationship with their immediate manager throughout the year; two had a mixed relationship; and four (Chelsea, Jessica, Belinda and Maggie) characterised the relationship as poor/bad. These experiences were based on perceived manager competence, including how managers afforded an appropriate level of autonomy, respect and trust towards staff.

Most participants described the relationship with their manager as good. They said this was because the manager was able to foster an environment where the participant could learn, grow and develop, and be valued for their abilities as a social worker. An ideal example of a good manager was Nina’s, whom she described as respectful and reliable, especially through maintaining an “open door” policy:

> …he is so approachable that I’m now getting the confidence to not have to approach him as much. I guess just always knowing I can if I need to, but then having a little bit more confidence in my own knowledge and putting my faith in myself a little bit more. (Nina, final interview)

Nina’s manager, who was not a social worker, emphasised that all disciplines in the organisation were of equal value, which encouraged Nina to express her professional identity. Her manager also provided constructive feedback, which helped Nina to
clarify and express her distinct identity, even though she was employed in a generic job title:

\[ I \text{ guess little things have popped up say in supervision with my manager or whatever, and he will ask me a question about what I am doing with clients and things like that, and he will say that's very “social workery” and it just makes me think, okay, well, why is that social workery? (Nina, second interview) } \]

\[ ...so when I had my three-month review, after I had started working full time, that was the first time that my boss had said: “Oh, you can tell you’re a social worker” – I think that was it when I thought to myself, okay, well, I think what I am doing is really social worker based. (Nina, second interview) \]

This example indicates that managers who respect social work are important even if they are not social workers themselves. Such supportive relationships can be an important external reference point for professional identity as they prompt newly qualified social workers to reflect and be valued for who they are.

Julia’s manager was similar to Nina’s and was described as inspiring on a daily basis, especially as she fostered a positive environment that filtered into other relationships in the organisation: “You walk away from her and she really impacts on you, but it’s such a gentle and unobtrusive kind of way, I just think that’s amazing” (Julia, first interview).

\[ ...because you look to these women and I really admire them, especially my CEO and my team leader, and they flow with their practice, and it’s to such a high level that you just want to be aspiring and growing to be as good, to have their respect, to be as professional as them, to be as competent as them, to gather your knowledge and your skills, grow and develop that. (Julia, second interview) \]

Julia’s manager also communicated effectively and included staff in the direction of the organisation:

\[ Like [our manager] always tells us what she’s doing…we are going to write a policy on this, and I’m submitting for funding out of this. Oh, does anyone have any thoughts, what do you guys think? And she’s constantly asking and informing us. (Julia, first interview) \]
These actions helped foster a sense of belonging, which assisted Julia in settling into the organisation and focusing on her growth and development.

In contrast to this, the participants who had a mixed or poor relationship with their managers, talked about incompetency, bullying, managers being dismissive of staff and client issues, having a micro-management style, and lacking appropriate boundaries. An example is Chelsea and her colleagues, who were constantly micromanaged and devalued for their expertise:

_ I love the job itself, but there’s so much office politics and the bullying, and the manager says this, and if you don’t do that, well, there’s not a lot of give and take. It’s just what she says goes._ (Chelsea, final interview)

Belinda also experienced a lack of respect for her social work background, and there was little regard for her views, or even her wellbeing, either:

...if you spoke with her about something, if you wanted to reflect on something...it wasn’t a learning environment; it was more like “What have you done that for” or, and then if you wanted to disagree with her and it’s not just based on my own beliefs but on your education, and that’s not a right, ethical or something like that...she’d be like “You don’t really think that do you?”

(Belinda, second interview)

_And I pretty much said to her [the manager] I feel like I’m burning out, I’m really stressed, I don’t like coming to work. I just laid it all out on the table, in supervision, and then I didn’t really get any response at all until like a month later. We had some supervision and I said: “Oh, I just feel like I haven’t got any sort of response from you about what I said.” And then she went and talked to [another manager], and then after that, she started saying, “Oh, how are you today?” Then she was sort of checking in. And I was just like well, it’s a little too late, it was just like, if someone came to me as a manager, if I was a manager, and said “Oh, I feel like I’m burning out”, I’d be doing something from that very second, you wouldn’t leave it for a month or two months._

(Belinda, final interview)

These experiences did not create a welcoming environment, where these participants could feel safe to critically reflect or express their professional identity, which compromised their growth and development.
**Supervision.** The second most discussed relationship was supervision. Participants were asked about access and arrangements for supervision at all of their interviews, as supervision is considered a fundamental relationship in social work practice (AASW, 2014). Fifteen participants had access to formal one-on-one supervision arrangements during the year. The frequency of supervision sessions varied across the group, which is mapped out in Table 26. Five of the participants are included twice in the table because they had supervision with their line manager, and supervision with someone outside of line management. A majority of eight participants had supervision only with their line manager throughout the year. For two participants their supervisor was either outside of line management (Claire) or completely external to the organisation (Michael).

Table 26

*Frequency of Formal Supervision Sessions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview phase</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Fortnightly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>6 weeks</th>
<th>Bi-monthly</th>
<th>Not specified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 26 indicates that the frequency of supervision sessions was most likely to be fortnightly or monthly. Over the year, seven participants experienced no variation in the frequency of sessions. Three participants experienced a decrease (Claire, Belinda and James), and five had an increase, because they either gained a new job where supervision was available (Damon and Gary), requested to start (Jessica) or had more supervision (Michael), or the agency changed arrangements (Nina).

Of the group, three participants were very satisfied overall with their supervision arrangements and experiences throughout the year. One was mostly satisfied, and a majority of seven described being satisfied. These participants had mixed feelings about the frequency and availability of supervision. Some participants were concerned about how supervision was sometimes pushed aside or frequently put off during busy periods. However, several participants stated that quality was more
important than frequency, and having diverse meaningful relationships, such as with social workers and colleagues, was just as necessary: “And I can ask any questions [in my team]; it’s like having supervision on tap. It’s amazing. I can turn around and ask any question at any time...” (Cass, second interview).

...well, I’ve gone without it for a long time. But now that I have it, I do like it; it fulfills that criteria where...you’re shaped administratively, you get to talk about cases and refine your practice. So there’s no doubt that it’s a benefit, but I’m not “hooking myself up to a drip and drinking myself to sleep” because I’m not getting any supervision. (Gary, final interview)

Quality formal supervision involved having needs understood as a supervisee and a newly qualified social worker. Supervision assisted with orientation/induction as well as ongoing growth and development:

...she’s actually set, like, such a high benchmark (laughs). I’m afraid to go anywhere else...but [she is] really, really perceptive. Very, very good listener and will always...offer a perspective or two that I hadn’t even thought of...so I usually have several light-bulb moments in there, and I’ve started writing things down so I don’t forget them. So yeah, I find it very supportive. (Isabella, first interview)

Throughout the year, Isabella’s external supervisor was an important part of her journey, especially for personal growth and development: “I have an excellent external supervisor, well who encouraged me to just be myself” (Isabella, second interview); “my external supervision is actually the ‘bee’s knees’... it is just fantastic, it’s really fantastic” (Isabella, final interview).

Participants preferred their supervisor to be someone who was appropriately qualified, experienced and skilled, who would be able to offer new perspectives on how to work with clients. It was important to have an appropriate space to deeply reflect, be able to explore personal and professional dimensions to practice and receive constructive feedback on their own development.
Only three participants explicitly reflected on their social work identity during supervision, which they found useful:

...as we talked about earlier, the thinking, doing and being – I have spent a lot of time with the reflection of my supervisor...that I have done a lot of time doing things, and I am a very good doer, and I can get myself out in the community and in newspapers and on radio and do good social work. I think the part that I needed to get onto now, and I am glad I’m getting onto now, is the being. Who am I as a person in this role, in this world, in this environment?

(Michael, second interview)

For most, professional identity was either implicit or not discussed at all. Instead, much of their supervision involved talking about client work, developing an understanding of the organisation, and administrative functions when supervision was with a manager.

Two participants experienced mixed satisfaction, and four were unsatisfied. These participants were exposed to ad hoc and detrimental arrangements, or no supervision at all:

...she is very unprofessional. I haven’t seen anything in her that inspires me or that gives me confidence in her abilities to be able to work with me, and that’s very unfortunate to have to say that about your supervisor. (Catherine, final interview)

...the acting manager because I spoke to him about that and I said: “I think it’s important. We need to have it [supervision], we’ve never had it.” So he has started that but it’s not supervision...but it’s more about when I get in there, it’s about him and what’s happened to him and all that stuff… (Jessica, final interview)

Again, it’s [external supervision] not often enough, but that’s affordability. (Geraldine, final interview)

They described how the supervisor would use sessions for their own needs, or only for administrative matters, discipline or performance review. For some, there was no reflective space, and it was not a supportive relationship. Another concern was when supervision was too infrequent, not prioritised, or the supervisor lacked competence.
Once again, there were consistencies, where Belinda and Jessica experienced negative supervision as part of a negative first year post-qualification period. Maggie and Chelsea experienced no formal one-on-one supervision throughout the year. Lack of access to quality supervision was another part of erosion of professional identity, job satisfaction and employment goals to seek a new position.

The participants’ experiences of supervision closely resembled those of participants in other studies, especially Jones et al. (2009) and Pack (2014), in which administrative functions became the main focus of supervision. However, at the beginning of their post-qualification journey, participants in my study highlighted that a lot of the administrative content was appropriately related to orientation during their transition and adjustment into practice. During this transition time, when participants were settling into their roles and developing confidence, supervision was an important relationship in which to seek feedback and ideas. Nonetheless, several participants still noted a balance was needed so that client work and administration did not dominate deeper reflection. Some stated there also needed to be wider critical reflection on professional identity, self-care and career goals, which is similar to findings in Pack’s (2014) New Zealand study. Catherine highlighted this when unpacking her experience of our research interview:

…it’s kind of like what supervision should be like for me. This is what I don’t get, and what I think is important for social work – if you’re going to sit down and talk to someone for two hours, the conversation needs to be at this level and depth…your career goals – what you’re passionate about. What you feel have been your successes. How is this affecting you? How is it shaping your identity? Where do you feel you’re lacking? Is there anything else you felt like you could have done? Are we supporting you properly? Do you have the resources you need? I have never been asked those questions in supervision. I would say my first supervisor did, but that was for five weeks and since then, I haven’t been asked those questions… (Catherine, final interview)

The participants’ views were similar to calls from Jones et al. (2009) in recognising how supervision needs can change over time, depending on where newly qualified social workers are in their transition and growth journey. It is important to have a supervisor who can explore these changes and continue to review the relationship with the supervisee.
**Personal relationships.** Fourteen participants talked about personal relationships, such as family and friends, as an important source for support and development throughout the year:

*I think I would have been impacted a lot worse if I hadn’t have had that [personal] relationship. I’m sure I would have. I have no doubts about that...he can tell when I’m really stressed and I’ve had a bad day.* (Catherine, final interview)

Catherine talked about being able to engage in good self-care through a supportive personal relationship. For Chelsea, throughout the whole year, it was important to be socially active with friends in order to disconnect from work and maintain a balance in her life, as well as debrief with someone outside of the profession:

*...like some days I’ll just ring a non-social work friend, and we’ll just talk about it because it...and they’re probably really for the really bad, bad days where you just go, ugh, why am I doing this?* (Chelsea, second interview)

Isabella captured how personal relationships can contribute directly to professional identity through support as well as learning:

*I have an incredibly supportive partner...I guess, in my social work identity work, well, he’s supported me a lot and really wanted to see me succeed, wanted to see me finish my studies and was fantastic around graduation ...and sometimes he will, if I make a remark, just say, “Sure, that’s because you’re a social worker and that’s how you think.” [laughs]...He makes those comments, occasionally...but I guess it makes up who I am... which I think ... interestingly enough, I think along the way some of that saturated his perspectives as well; I think it seeped in there.... because we hang out with people a lot, we end up taking on each other’s views and it bleeds across...* (Isabella, second interview)

Many participants agreed that one can become more aware of whom they are as social worker through their personal relationships.

**Networks.** Participants described formal and informal networks they joined and/or created as part of networking for professional identity; networking for learning, development and support; and finally, networking for practice. Participants said that
networks were an integral part of connectedness because they could build relationships to experience collective identity:

Yeah, it’s a child protection inter-agency group. And it’s got a lot of social workers that go to it...some of those people are actually employed as social workers... and they’ve been...doing it for quite a while, too. But there’s an acknowledged sense of identity around that. From other group...members. (Geraldine, first interview)

Inter-agency groups were one way of building networks with colleagues, professionals and social workers in the broader community. However, Jessica and Belinda, who experienced a negative year, were prevented from attending inter-agency meetings:

They exist here, obviously, but nobody from this organisation was going. And I was asking why, and I was trying to explain why it’s important for us to go, and the manager at the time, even though I liked that she was client focused, there were other things about her management style that I didn’t like, and that was one of them, where we weren’t to go. (Jessica, second interview)

Both missed networking for practice and connectedness to social workers.

Nine participants described informal networks to which they belonged, including specific groups for social workers. One informal network was designed specifically for newly qualified social workers:

We’ve only really had a couple of sessions. We’ll usually put a case study forward so everyone can have their [say], and probably settling into work and for some people a new area, some people have come out of Sydney or other areas...It’s geographical for them...and everyone has an equal say. (Cass, second interview)

These informal networks were initiated by practitioners needing connectedness with social workers and usually operated outside of work time (for example, during breaks and after-work hours):

...I sort of informally meet with other social workers, just maybe having dinner or something, but apart from that...I think it’s really important...getting that network just around you... and there is another one...he’s actually a social
We qualified the same year, but he’s in [another town], so we sort of have phone calls here and there just to debrief or just talk about our profession. (Rueben, final interview)

While informal networks were described as important, their membership ebbed and flowed because of time and resources to maintain them. Participants noted it was challenging, like other meaningful relationships, to foster and maintain networks when they are not embedded into organisational structures or workloads.

**Role models.** Nine participants talked about informal relationships with role models – people who inspired them and contributed to learning and development, especially for consolidating identity. Through observational practice, participants identified actions they could integrate into their own practice in order to express and foster their professional identity:

_I look at some professionals and I think, yeah, I’d like to be like that person, not only in my…work but also to the people that I’m helping...because it’s a nature that they have with people... That’s [the] person I’d like to come and help me (laughs) and that’s the person I’d like to be like._ (Gary, first interview)

Gary noted that anyone can be a role model. It does not have to be an ongoing relationship; one can simply observe someone who is inspirational in a given moment:

...when I first met her I was like, wow. She was chairing a meeting and I thought she is absolutely...amazing; her style of communication; she was on the ball as in she knew exactly what was going on around the table with different people...She was really...well informed and she was so kind in her speech...I’m just floored by kindness… (Isabella, first interview)

Alternatively, Catherine identified how some people can be uninspiring in practice, but still useful for learning:

...they go a lot on their feelings and emotions and reading people and situations, which has got value, but it’s not always the best way to approach things.... I kind of be selective about who I want to go to [for information or advice]. (Catherine, second interview)
By observing others, participants were able to articulate what they considered to be ideal and poor practice, which contributed to articulating what it means to be a social worker.

**Mentors.** Seven participants talked about mentoring relationships with experienced staff, which were based on support, learning and development: “…if I need to, I’ll approach her for some mentorship around theory and stuff, and I’ll see how it’s applied…we can we can have some really good theoretical conversations” (Isabella, first interview).

No one had mentors formally available or assigned to them in their workplace. Instead, these relationships were informally established and unfolded in everyday interactions. When she started, Julia was directly approached by a former supervisor:

...so she’s actually, ah, come on board as my mentor...So I’ve got a mentor...she offered that to me...as my supervision during placement was ending, she just said to me: “I was given the gift of a really great mentor when I started, and I would like to give that to you”, and I just thought there wouldn’t be anyone better, really, because she’s fantastic. (Julia, first interview)

This was a personal arrangement between Julia and her mentor.

Participants stated that these relationships can complement reflective functions of supervision. However, like networking, maintaining informal mentor relationships was a challenge when faced with workload demands and limited resources: “She was like a mentor in a way, and I don’t get a chance to actually talk… to talk with her that much now...” (Isabella, second interview).

Two participants advocated for formal mentoring as part of support and connectedness for newly qualified social workers (Belinda), and regular contact when transitioning into a new role (Vivienne):

Well, it’d be good to have a mentor if you’re moving into something new, or if you work as a sole worker; it’s important to have support so that you do have someone to debrief with on a regular basis, and share some of the responsibilities with and have your initiatives acknowledged. And sometimes people...take things on a day-to-day basis and expect that you just keep
carrying on without, I suppose, much encouragement and much support.

(Vivienne, second interview)

Vivienne’s preferences correspond with wider literature on how mentoring can be useful during induction (Bradley, 2008; McPherson & Barnett, 2006), when workers are settling into their role and need feedback and positive interactions.

**Lecturers.** Finally, four participants had ongoing connections with former lecturers during their post-qualification year, including support for job seeking, undertaking research, and teaching. These relationships had supportive, and learning and development, functions that contributed to professional identity:

*Because it’s something else that I have been able to achieve with [a former lecturer’s] help. It’s just becomes, now, Cass the person who worked with [a lecturer] to publish an article in a journal. Yeah, and that makes me a social worker.* (Cass, final interview)

The participants’ experiences reinforced the impacts of education but also that disconnecting from the university environment does not mean disconnecting entirely from lecturers. It suggests academics can have an ongoing role with newly qualified social workers. These experiences add weight to Clapton’s (2013) assertion that universities could play a role in the post-qualification period, especially for graduates who are seeking positions or need further support with the transition.

**Team and Organisational Culture**

This section explores how teams and organisations develop cultures at the meso level that can foster and/or erode professional identity. In relation to the former, 15 participants stated that team culture was an important part of fostering and/or eroding their professional identity. The participants were employed in diverse teams, which included social work teams, program teams, allied health teams and multidisciplinary teams. They described how these various teams had their own culture based on dynamics, norms and power.

Throughout the year, the participants said it was necessary to be aware of team culture and reflected on ways to work effectively within the dynamics of a team:

*I think, too, there’s...we have 17 women in our organisation; it’s tricky, it can be tricky...The dynamics of that is within itself... I don’t get into the politics of*
it, whereas a lot of other people do, and [our team leader] has to manage that, so sometimes I get the…we get the transference from her having to deal with internal politics…it’s like a vortex sometimes; you know, when you can get sucked into people’s…And I’m thinking within my team – negativity…I work with these people every day, spend a lot of time with them…So how do you not align with them in terms of their views, but still maintain your own position and…work effectively together? So that’s ongoing. (Julia, final interview)

A like-minded and strong team assisted with fostering professional identity and was a buffer against stresses in the wider organisation and work:

It’s probably better in a team. I’ve found it’s better being in a team, overall, because you have that comradeship, you have people checking in of an afternoon as to how you’re going or how the day went, and those sorts of things. (Vivienne, second interview)

Belinda and Jessica, who both experienced a negative year, stated that one of the reasons they stayed as long as they did was their team: “…she [team colleague] really respects me and I respect her, and as people but as workers as well, and so we work, we can do that brainstorming processing thing really well together” (Belinda, second interview).

I actually got offered some different jobs, and at one point I was really frustrated, so I did look at taking one, but then I sort of really thought about I actually really like the team that’s here. I like my colleagues. I think that they are in it for the right reasons. Not to say that other people aren’t, but they operate from a philosophy that sits well with me, where it is about the clients and it is about supporting each other, and it is about working as a team… (Jessica, second interview)

They described the team environment as one that can be an important source of support and assistance, and it can offset some of the wider organisational culture. However, both acknowledged that this eroded when structural issues persisted and their teams deteriorated.

An ideal example of a productive and nurturing team was described by James. In all his interviews, he regularly talked about his social work team as having a culture of support, including: “[informal] supervision every day several times a day…” (James,
and advocacy for the social work role through a strong collective identity:

*I think there's an individual identity, but there's probably a group identity as well, that we, together, are a department; we're working towards the same goal. Perhaps that's part of the identity, I don't know. Or just that we all feel the same way; perhaps, we all just happen to have the same resolve and feel the same way, I don't know; but it's certainly a strong identity as a group.* (James, second interview)

A range of dynamics and norms were important within positive teams such as trust, staying connected, open communication, mutual respect, commitment to each other, reflection and debriefing, and collective action.

Eight participants reflected specifically on team culture within multidisciplinary settings. Each person said it was meaningful to work within these types of teams. For some, it prompted them to clarify a distinct social work identity as part of their transition and adjustment:

*...so people in general at work are sort of referring to me more as a social worker in the context of what I am doing. So, I will do something with a client and they will say, oh, that's the social worker coming out in you and things like that.* (Nina, second interview)

Most stated that they had positives experiences within multidisciplinary teams. This occurred when all members understood and valued the contribution all professionals made. Despite this, several participants experienced challenges, particularly in health, where they saw social work devalued by other medical professions: “...*they just think we’re there to throw a spanner in the works. I’ve had some doctors that really have very little respect for what we do...*” (James, second interview).

In contested contexts such as this, participants emphasised being mindful of dominant cultures in multidisciplinary teams and advocating for their role as part of maintaining their social work identity.

More broadly, any team permeated by a culture of negativity had a range of impacts. For example, Rueben observed a dominant culture of judgement towards clients within his team environment. He became mindful of how this stood in contrast to his
social work identity and the importance of not being acculturated into those norms: “...And just to talk positively with my other co-workers about our clients so that they don’t all sort of judge them...In a way that’s disrespectful to me” (Rueben, first interview).

Rueben used his observations as a catalyst to consolidate his social work identity. He reiterated it was not a given that a negative team culture will erode professional identity. Instead, he reflected on his experiences and tried to change the team culture by not engaging in judgemental talk with team members.

Ten participants noted and/or experienced some negative aspects of team culture. Reflecting on his field placement experiences, Gary emphasised how some of the hardest work is with colleagues, not clients:

I kind of have this ideal of social workers...they’re in tune to people...they care about other people, yet often it was definitely not demonstrated between each other. Between one professional to another, it was almost chilling, sometimes. (Gary, first interview)

Negative dynamics included ongoing conflict and bullying, lack of support and camaraderie, lack of respect for discipline backgrounds, and unprofessional behaviour. While most participants had positive experiences in their teams overall, elements of these negative aspects surfaced at times. Many acknowledged there are inevitable highs and lows within teams but maintaining respect and working through difficulties together can positively maintain a good team culture in the long term.

Organisational culture. Participants also talked about organisational culture in all of their interviews. They described how organisational culture was based on the norms and dynamics of their employing organisation or office. The culture extended beyond their immediate relationships with colleagues and their team into wider relationships in an office, such as between programs, teams, and especially management.

Fifteen participants reflected on enculturation and emphasised being critically reflective about their professional identity and its relationship to organisational cultures. They were mindful of avoiding enculturation into practices that did not reflect their social work identity. For example, Cass reflected on avoiding the practice of pathologising client experiences in hospital work: “...And I don’t like to label
people...it goes against what I would value or what I would...how I would like to be as a professional...working from someone else’s perspective...I wouldn’t like to be labelled myself” (Cass, first interview).

With this in mind, the participants described how there can be a balancing act of identities between the role, profession and organisation:

...in some ways you have your own individual identity, but there’s an organisational identity that can tend to take over what it is you’re talking about, and how you’re seeing things, and how situations should be dealt with. A lot of that comes under organisational identity, although I still maintain when I’m talking and working through things with my supervisors or managers, there’s ethical consideration of what I will and won’t do, and how I take things into consideration, because always, and I think increasingly, I’ve seen in this organization. There are financial constraints, and I’ve gone in quite a few times and really made big applications for extra resources, because I think that they’re really needed and justified, and I’ve had to use theory to back up why I think that that was really important, and ask them to put aside financial considerations. (Catherine, second interview)

Catherine demonstrates how managing the relationship between her professional identity and her job role at the individual level was only one part of the picture, as the wider organisational identity at the meso level also framed her job and must be taken into consideration.

A majority of nine participants (Catherine, Claire, Damon, Gary, Geraldine, Isabella, James, Rueben and Vivienne) experienced a mixed organisational culture throughout the year, where there were both positive and negative dynamics and norms. Positive norms included being recognised as social workers, and working in a respectful environment. These experiences were captured by four participants (Cass, Julia, Michael and Nina), who described experiencing a positive organisational culture throughout the whole year:

... people having confidence in me in my ability, as well, so not only just me being able to say, okay, well, if someone’s given me a job, then surely I must be able to do something...and others not judging me as a new graduate; just saying that, yes, you are a new graduate and not giving me limitations, giving
me empowerment to be able to find what it is that I need to find. (Cass, second interview)

...of course sometimes people have their bad days and sometimes there’s a bad vibe going on, but there is never any... you know, how sometimes the air is so thick you could cut it? Like there is never anything like that. Really, if someone is just having a crappy day, they sort of just get left alone for the day and that’s that. I have definitely worked in some places that have a lot worse culture. I think because we have a lot of meetings and the staff get an opportunity to really voice their concerns a lot. I think that is helpful. (Nina, second interview)

I think things have been great, really, and I...I just never anticipated how good it would feel, but in saying that, there have still been challenges in terms of my social work identity and holding my position within that, but it’s not so hard, though, in an organisation that values social work so heavily...(Julia, final interview)

For Michael, this included being supported to access quality supervision and professional development as part of working in an isolated rural position:

I said [during my interview], I want to have supervision whenever I need to have it. And I want to be assisted to do professional development and undertake training that will assist me to be a better worker. And if I can’t have those, then I do not want this position… (Michael, first interview)

On the whole, the participants’ experiences of organisational culture were largely connected to relationships with immediate and higher managers as they were in decision-making and hierarchical positions, and therefore had the power to influence the culture of a whole organisation.

The nine participants who had a mixed organisational culture, maintained that in order to not burnout, it was important to experience a healthy balance of positive and negative norms. If there were sustained, long-term stress, the risk of burnout and erosion of identity increased: “...if I fell in a heap and lost all sense of self and kind of just got tired of fighting and just couldn’t stand it anymore, that would probably take it [identity] down” (Geraldine, second interview).
None of the nine said that their professional identities had been eroded, but they could see the potential for threats if organisational issues led to sustained stress. These participants stated that negative norms and dynamics did not automatically erode professional identity. For example, some hospital settings, where a social work identity is not understood or always valued, foster professional identity further as practitioners clarify who they are and advocate for the social work role, which James talked about throughout all of his interviews. A strong identity within his team played an important role in mediating the wider organisational culture and preventing an erosion of identity.

Four participants (Belinda, Chelsea, Maggie and Jessica), all of whom were young and female, described experiencing a largely negative organisational culture throughout their year after graduation. In particular, all four consistently described micromanagement and workplace bullying as regular experiences within the whole organisation: “I feel like I haven’t had a chance to work on anything, just being, like, managing each day as it comes; [I’m] not actually bettering anything” (Belinda, final interview).

I want out, so to speak…I really like social work as a profession, so I don’t want to leave it. But I’m not using my entire skill set, and it drives me nuts…I guess the manager’s behaviour is kind of limiting, and more so in the last – I’m going to say a bit longer – than six months…And she just feels like she needs to micromanage me, and I don’t need to be micromanaged… (Chelsea, final interview)

I can’t call myself a social worker – I don’t have that identity in that sense because I don’t practise it, but I can definitely take aspects of what I’ve learnt… (Maggie, final interview)

I think I’ve been very fortunate in the past with most of my jobs where I’ve felt, like, I’ve been quite productive, and you feel like you are making a difference. And you feel like you’re able to give feedback without any type of consequence to that because you want to see things improve, and if you identify something, it doesn’t mean that somebody has to take it on board, but usually you’re still allowed to have some type of a voice. And I just feel like that’s…that’s not the case here and that’s really quite…quite difficult for me, personally. (Jessica, final interview)
Geraldine also noted the impacts of workplace bullying: "I had this experience recently where there was a bit of kind of internal bullying by exclusion happening within the organisation, which has been the roller coaster..." (Geraldine, second interview).

The four participants who experienced a negative organisational culture for most of the year witnessed high staff turnover, recruitment issues and burnout amongst colleagues. These experiences had mixed impacts on their professional identities. Belinda and Maggie described significant erosion of their professional identities, whereas Jessica and Chelsea were still able to grow and develop. There are some possible reasons for why this occurred, which include prior experience and being able to express their social work identity (Jessica) as well as having access to other meaningful academic activities and support, including other social workers (Chelsea). Despite this, all four described poor job satisfaction, and moved or were actively looking to move into new positions or other professions because of the organisational culture they experienced. Their experiences are consistent with those of participants in other studies, where organisational culture was emphasised as a major contributor to job satisfaction and retention (for example, Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Healy et al., 2015; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2009).

**Discussion**

The participants’ stories indicate that connectedness was a fundamental need during their first 12 months post-qualification period. The connectedness was based on individual and social relationships, which is consistent with other studies in the area (Healy et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2016; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Manthorpe et al., 2015; Wiles, 2012). These authors argue that a range of relationships are important for support and development, especially for orientation, debriefing, reflection and learning. Thus, the participants’ professional identities were built and sustained within a wide network of relationships that served a variety of purposes. This is important to note because most of the participants worked in rural and regional areas, where it can be difficult to access sufficient support. In this study, many of the participants were able to draw from a mix of formal and informal relationships to meet their needs, although there were some challenges with consistent access to formal support, especially when the workplace became busy.
In everyday interactions with various colleagues, social workers can construct and express their knowledge and practice base (Payne, 2006). Participants’ stories concur with this view, but also place emphasis on the relationships with other social workers; experiencing a collective identity was quite an important part of learning and development. While the participants benefited from a mix of formal and informal relationships, it is necessary to further explore the balance between these relationships. Many of the participants’ relationships were arranged informally and were prone to regular changes when there were time and resource constraints. Also, some participants relied on personal relationships for support and debriefing, which could impact on personal and professional boundaries. These findings raise questions about whether connections, especially with social workers, ought to be formalised in workplaces, such as through mentoring, networking and supervision, particularly during the early months of transition and adjustment. Peer learning can be an important need and part of positive organisational cultures (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). However, the busy realities of practice leave little time for maintaining informal relationships so further consideration could be given to systemic needs.

The participants’ concerns about organisational culture were consistent with other studies, where individual and social factors such as heavy workloads, emotional demands, and lack of support were consistently raised as issues for newly qualified social workers (Carpenter et al., 2012; Cheung et al., 2015; Healy et al., 2015; Hussein et al., 2014; Jack & Donnellan, 2010). These findings add some nuance by emphasising that organisational culture can not only impact job satisfaction and retention, but also erosion of professional identity.

The participants in my study called for a positive organisational culture based on quality relationships across all levels of an agency, where trust, respect and validation of each other form the basis of interactions. This corresponds with literature on effective organisational cultures that includes being relationship and value driven, workers having transparent and manageable workloads, access to the right tools to practise and develop, and an open culture based on learning rather than risk and defence (Stanley & Lincoln, 2016). With this in mind, further questions are raised about the impacts of managers and organisational culture. Some studies on newly qualified social workers examined the perceptions of those who manage (Manthorpe et al., 2014) or hire them (van Bommel et al., 2014). Stories from my study place greater emphasis on the contribution and performance of managers as they were
experienced by the participants as an important influence on how individuals, teams and organisations functioned. The findings are similar to one Australian study where perceived manager competence was an important feature in the participants’ experiences (Healy et al., 2015). Participants in my study provided insight not only into wider organisational factors that could influence professional identity but also provided examples and ideas regarding what constitutes “good” and “bad” manager behaviours (Table 27).

Table 27

*Examples of “Good” and “Bad” Manager Behaviours that Impact on Professional Identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Examples of “Good” Management Behaviour</th>
<th>Examples of “Bad” Management Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Displays leadership by showing trust in the abilities of employees.</td>
<td>Allows workers to have autonomy in decision-making when working with clients.</td>
<td>Does not allow a newly qualified social worker to express or act on their own professional judgement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows respect to staff and clients.</td>
<td>Acknowledges and values diverse professional identities.</td>
<td>Discourages staff from embracing their professional identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintains ethical personal and professional boundaries.</td>
<td>Delves into and criticises the personal life of an employee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has demonstrated competency in a management role.</td>
<td>Provides long-term direction and vision, based on clear values.</td>
<td>Contradicts the values, mission and policies of the organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is able to openly and transparently communicate with staff on a regular basis.</td>
<td>Does not communicate with staff, or is rarely present and available for assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides consistent support and fosters a learning environment in the workplace.</td>
<td>Gives constructive and complimentary feedback, including on professional identity.</td>
<td>Engages in bullying behaviour such as threats, intimidation and exclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitates professional self-care practices, such as manageable workloads, and allows staff to take leave when necessary.</td>
<td>Expects newly qualified social workers to handle unrealistic and excessive workloads without support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understands the individual needs of newly qualified social workers.</td>
<td>Ignores individual context, and assumes what a newly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Managers were described as gatekeepers to further support and development, who had power over the participants’ workloads. This made them a crucial stakeholder in the lives and professional identities of the newly qualified social workers in my study. It would be worth further exploring these behaviours, including possible forms of discrimination related to gender and age. Younger women in the study were more likely to experience a negative organisational culture and manager. This could reflect the fact most of the participants were female, but it does warrant consideration. In Australia, Aglias (2010) calls for further inclusion of managers’ perceptions in this area of research, as do Manthorpe et al. (2014) in England. While this is important, further exploration of management styles could also be useful. The profession should not only look at managers’ and employers’ perceptions of newly qualified social workers. This would merely reinforce issues raised by Moriarty et al. (2011), who argue there is little room for newly qualified social workers in the UK to assess their own managers. Participants in my study provided some assessment of their managers by describing the quality of their relationship with them and their managers’ behaviours, which influenced their lived experience of professional identity.

Finally, it is positive to note that most of the participants in my study had access to formal supervision, and were satisfied with their experiences. However, many did not have supervision arrangements that reflected the AASW (2014) standards, which recommend that new graduates have fortnightly sessions. Supervision is a fundamental activity in social work practice but findings from this study indicate that the frequency of sessions varied across the group, which is similar to findings elsewhere in Australia (Healy et al., 2015). Also, some participants’ concerns about
the content of supervision reflect the concerns of participants in other studies such as Manthorpe’s et al. (2015). In the findings of this English study, managers stated how supervision generally focused on administrative elements. The experiences of participants in my study raise questions about the needs and the adequacy of systemic support for newly qualified social workers in the Australian professional landscape. How to meet those needs in the Australian context would require further attention. The AASW Supervision Standards (2014) stipulate what is expected, but there is little accountability or regulatory frameworks to facilitate consistent access to supervision. Australian social work is not registered, and membership of the association is voluntary. In England, where registration and protection of title exist, Carpenter et al. (2015) found that the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) had become increasingly embedded into workplaces, and benefits, such as more reflective supervision and wider retention were being seen. Cheron-Sauer (2012) notes, there could be lessons for Australia to learn from England, which is echoed by Healy et al. (2015) who recommends that Australia trials ASYE.

**Chapter Summary**

The participants did not construct and develop their professional identities on their own; they developed within networks of relationships and organisational settings characterised by various norms and dynamics. In particular, experiencing a collective identity with other social workers was highlighted as a positive contributor to fostering professional identity, which led to identifying the importance of systemic relational needs of newly qualified social workers. However, as for the individual context, these relational and organisational contexts do not occur in isolation, but within wider macro environments, which also need further exploration.
Chapter 11

Lived Experience That Fosters and Erodes Professional Identity at the Environmental (Macro) Level

I will now explore how the macro environment influenced the professional identities of the participants (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Macro dimensions which foster and/or erode professional identity.

The first part of the chapter examines how physical spaces impact on the expression of professional identity. For the purposes of the thesis, I have included physical spaces as part of the macro environment. The second part outlines the socio-cultural environment based on dominant discourses and perceptions of social work. As detailed earlier in the thesis, discourses are defined as contextual theories that express ideas and language about social phenomena, especially ways of intervening in people’s lives (Healy, 2014). These physical and social environments reflect the lived space (spatiality) that van Manen (1997) explains is an important phenomenological dimension to lived experience.

After exploring these environmental contexts, I will then identify the support and development needs that the participants described were fundamental to fostering and sustaining their professional identity during their first 12 months post-qualification.
period. These needs transcend the micro and meso layer to capture a multilayered systemic view of how to conceptualise and support newly qualified social workers, no matter where they are employed.

**Physical Environment**

Participants reflected on how personal office space, wider office space and geographical space, especially in rural locations, influenced their professional identities. Six participants talked about personal office space and stated it should be welcoming and reflective of their professional identity:

> ...I sort of delve into creating an environment – the physical environment as we sit in my office that’s literally reflecting a 5 out of 10 at the moment as far as an office goes, too, as I just want to make this more liveable; I want to get rid of this boring clock. It was handy because I needed to tell the time; I want to put these in better spots… (Michael, second interview)

Several participants said that their personal office space can impact their relationships with colleagues and clients, which can have implications for self-care, privacy and ethics: “So you can’t have lunch unless you close your office door and eat over your computer; that isn’t client free” (Geraldine, second interview); “…one thing that stood out for me sometimes when you’re working in the pod situation, when you can maybe be on a phone call and you’ll probably be talking at the top of your voice…” (Rueben, first interview).

In terms of the wider office space, the aesthetic nature of the organisation was also said to be important. An appropriate space can influence the atmosphere of an entire organisation and have positive implications for relationships. For example, Damon appreciated the youth-friendly atmosphere of the building in his new job, which also reflected his personal style and life stage. Geraldine moved into a new office and noticed positive impacts on organisational culture:

> We’ve moved, so that was huge…and it actually – it created a cultural change… And we did it quite equitably as well, the move, there was “no, I’m having this office, you’re not”. And we actually literally tossed a coin and we got an impartial person to toss it… the transition has been great. The environment is really good, the physical environment is lovely. We don’t have to scrabble
about [for] parking; we’ve actually got parking areas… (Geraldine, final interview)

In contrast to this, Jessica noted how the wider office space was used to isolate workers from each another:

...another thing that I didn’t agree with was when there were two of us [in the team] left, instead of being able to work in the same office, because we’d always sat together in the whole time since I started, we had to split up. So again it was like...well, we don’t want anybody here to be close knit or supporting each other. (Jessica, final interview)

The final aspect of the physical environment was about geographical space, which participants said influenced the cultural context of a location, experiences of environment and climate, access to jobs and resources, and relationships. For many, professional identity, especially the personal self, can be strongly tied to where one lives and works:

...it’s been home for five years – you take me out of [here], I’m just going to go, “nah, don’t like this”. So, that would...it may not take me back in social work identity, but it would take me back personally… (Chelsea, second interview)

Many of the participants who lived in regional and rural areas reflected on experiences of rural social work. Two particular examples were Michael and Gary. Michael had ongoing experiences in rural settings and mentioned in all his interviews about the importance of understanding the idiosyncrasies of rural social work: “I do know that there is a clear difference between social work in a big location and social work in a small rural population...and it is tougher, I think, because of the social remote isolation” (Michael, first interview).

Due to this isolation, Michael emphasised throughout the year that it was important to be proactive about accessing supervision and professional development, which he found was increasingly offered through online technologies. Gary also said online technologies were helpful; it enabled him to stay connected with social workers all over the state. These technologies complemented on-the-ground support in the early months of his job. Gary noted how his organisation recognised the needs of new workers as they transitioned to a complex role and operated in remote communities, which can be isolating. These multiple mechanisms for support were important in his
remote work. What struck Gary about living in a remote location was the climate. Gary moved from the coast to a remote inland location, with a vastly different climate. This distinct change remained part of his reflection throughout the year:

The geographical shift is, I guess... that’s in a box in itself altogether. I mean, as I was saying, just being away from the sea and that lifestyle, and now being [here] where people go hunting and no one goes into the sea, and it hasn’t rained since we got here. So that in itself is one thing. (Gary, second interview)

Another dimension to this was the transitional population of where Gary lived. It was common for people to work in his remote area for short periods and then leave, which meant long-term residents were reluctant to form friendships, which Gary found could be challenging at times.

The participants reflected on other typical challenges in rural social work, including access to supervision and professional development, job-seeking opportunities, and challenges with personal/professional boundaries:

...I’ve kind of lost some of that social network as well because as a result, I believe, of working here [in a small town]. (Geraldine, second interview)

... [it] can impact your personal life when you’re walking down the street with your friend and, you know, maybe your friend doesn’t know much about what you do, and the next minute you’ve got somebody from across the street saying stuff about you… (Jessica, first interview)

One participant, who lived in a rural context, regularly experienced discrimination from a manager and other human service professionals, based on their disability. They reflected it can be hard to address discrimination in a rural setting because the working community is much smaller and reputation can be easily compromised if their discriminatory attitudes are challenged. Despite these challenges, the participants stated they preferred to live in a smaller community and sought to find a balance between challenges and opportunities:

...I know I could go into a city and get a job. I do know that. And I’ve been asked that. But the trade-off is I have my house and I have my land...I have my animals....so I can kind of whinge about it, or I can just kind of make the most of it. (Geraldine, first interview)
These experiences show how meaning can be attached to where one lives and works, which can also reflect social work identity. Just as dress can be an expression of values and identity (Scholar, 2012), the meaning and aesthetics of the physical environment are part of this lived experience.

**Socio-Cultural Environment**

The participants described how wider socio-cultural environments were influenced by dominant discourses and perceptions of social work, which in turn affected their professional identities. Four discourses were discussed by participants across interviewing: neo-conservatism, managerialism, positivist science and gender. These discourses influenced perceptions of social work, which the participants had to mediate or resist, as part of fostering their professional identity. Fifteen participants believed their professional identity had not been directly eroded by these discourses and perceptions, but it was important to navigate and/or challenge these discourses and perceptions.

**Neo-conservative and managerial discourses.** Participants commented on neo-conservative and managerial discourses being present in tandem. They said that these discourses privileged individual-based roles and solutions, as well as performance outputs, which could be seen in their own work:

> And we’ve got KPIs to meet – key performance indicators where we need to see a certain number of people per day to justify our positions as well... And the government expects us, like social workers, to be doing certainly more transactional, to try to save, to be cost effective...getting through the numbers.  
> (Maggie, first interview)

Maggie reinforced these trends in her second interview, after leaving the organisation. She described feeling dehumanised because the work was largely transactional, rather than interactional, which contributed to the erosion of her professional identity.

Throughout the interviewing process, several participants raised questions about the impacts of neo-conservatism and managerialism on their work:

> I just want to reflect on some of the discourses that have been in my practice so far, and also some of the challenges that I’ve actually encountered as I try to develop my identity...as a social worker. And how to manage the managerial
discourse...I wanted to maintain my same being with them [my organisation], but at the same time trying to identify myself as a social worker and standing for the values of our profession. (Rueben, second interview)

I don’t know how to explain it but, like, trying to operate from a concept where you are looking at the rights of the individual, but you are also looking at all of those layers and how to reconcile that and those values and that code of ethics – how to reconcile that with a neo-liberal sort of type environment, where it is about...that competitive streak – like survival of the fittest, almost. And how do social workers reconcile their values and their practices within that type of environment because it does filter into everything that you do, I think. (Jessica, final interview)

Some participants noted benefits of these discourses, such as an increased focus on client choice, which complemented their social work mindset. However, they remained largely critical of these discourses, particularly when the discourses increased administrative loads and/or did not reflect how they preferred to practise as social workers:

And as I said to our manager, that’s great that you want to do that [keep evaluation data], but what are you going to do with the information? “Oh, it just sits on file...It’s basically just ticking a box.” (Geraldine, first interview)

Some participants wondered where social work is heading and how the profession will be valued in the future because of these discourses:

I think we’re heading into some really, really challenging times. Politically, I wonder how social work will survive, you know, the whole neo-liberalist agenda...still seems to be going down the road of spending less on assisting people and, you know, looking after the public purse...if that’s going to be a continuing trend, professions like social work are just going to be, perhaps, more strained in terms of resources [and] availability of employment. (Gary, first interview)

..in terms of right-wing politics...social work probably isn’t even a necessity because communities should be able to sort themselves out through do-it-yourself programs [pause] and that extreme level of larger organisations can
deliver programs through that competitive market place and sort local communities out…(Isabella, second interview)

I am concerned, however, with what our government departments are deciding that we can do, and what we can have at this stage… it’s always there that economic rationalism; they want you to do more with less money…once upon a time NGOs could tailor programs to local communities’ needs, but I think that gets harder and harder. (Isabella, final interview)

Nonetheless, Isabella and Gary reflected across their interviews that there are multiple ways of doing social work, without even being employed in a social work role or the sector. The professional identity can be sustained wherever one may go.

**Positivist science discourse.** A major discourse that participants reflected on throughout the interviewing process was the positivist scientific discourse, which they observed in the work of colleagues, especially in medicine and psychology. Within health settings, this positivist epistemology is expressed through the medical model, which characterises clients as bio-physical beings that must be diagnosed and intervened upon through expert positivist knowledge (Healy, 2014). For those participants working in the health sector, the medical model had an ongoing presence in their work. Jessica also saw this model emerging in the aged-care NGO where she worked:

...the assessment paperwork is very much focused on the old-school medical model stuff, so it’s around functionality, and it’s all around biological stuff. There is very little on the psycho-social side of things. And so I said: “We are talking about – we are supposed to be doing comprehensive holistic assessment – that’s what the organisation says that we do.” (Jessica, second interview)

Jessica advocated for these forms to be reconsidered to embrace wider sources of knowledge, which would reflect her professional identity.
The positivist scientific discourse also emerged when working with psychology colleagues. Many of the participants noted how this discourse was expressed as evidence-based practice (EBP). An example is cognitive behaviour therapy, which was observed as dominant in psychology interventions:

...as I said to my supervisor, I’ve got to remember, like, social work obviously has a lot to offer and so not to get caught up in a predominantly psychological place...the stuff they do is all psychology, like CBT... (Damon, final interview)

While most participants embraced aspects of EBP as part of their own professional identity, they preferred multiple epistemologies. However, because of this, some participants were concerned that social work has a lower status in comparison to medicine and psychology:

*I think that the social work discourse is over [ridden] by the others. I think we’ve got economic at the top...science, medical model, and then the psych discourses. Psychology overrides social work...so social work really does sit, in terms of the pecking order, down the bottom on the bottom rung in that sense. And yet I think that social work does the most to achieve change, really...* (Isabella, first interview)

In this environment, the participants came across a range of stereotypes of social workers, which included being seen as “wishy washy” (James, first interview), people who lacked professionalism and were “do-gooders” (Vivienne, first interview), and who were there to “throw a spanner in the works” (James, second and third interviews). Participants linked these perceptions to wider dominant discourses, such as the positivist discourse, where their roles and professionalism were judged against medicine and psychology. Participants said social work was too often seen as not conforming to the standards of these professions and therefore lacked legitimacy.

The participants also said a hierarchy generally emerged and privileged medical practitioners and psychologists. In hospitals, participants said that they constructed a social work identity sitting outside or alongside the medical hierarchy as part of building their professional identity:

*On the other hand, I think... we’re just not in the hierarchy at all, I like to think that we’re not, not that we’re at the bottom, we’re just not in it at all; we’re somewhere else.* (James, second interview)
They did not want to become part of the medical hierarchy or see social work being devalued because of this discourse. However, Gary had a different experience because in Centrelink social work is at the top of the hierarchy:

*I kind of feel at the top of the food chain and [laughs] – and I’m not saying for one minute that’s an opportunity to dispense power on people, but there’s more – I guess people are more interested in your viewpoints, and there’s an opportunity to share theory, and you’re more at the top of the hierarchy if there is that in people’s workplaces. But there is certainly in Centrelink.* (Gary, second interview)

Despite the hierarchy in health, several participants noted that important cultural changes were unfolding: “…it’s a culture in the older doctors because they’re just not trained that way. They’re just not open to that. Some of the younger ones, they’re fine…” (Cass, first interview).

Also, in mental health, Vivienne and Claire said the growing prominence of the recovery model was useful because it complemented much of social work, which legitimised their work, especially in the eyes of medical practitioners.

In relation to psychology, nine participants said that psychology was valued more in the industry and wider community. Jessica noted this as part of undertaking postgraduate study in psychology:

*…even though I want to practice as a social worker, what I’ve noticed, even like when I did my prac in the health department…There seems to be a…it’s probably just my opinion, but I’ve felt like social workers weren’t looked on as highly as psychologists were…* (Jessica, first interview)

Participants observed another hierarchy where psychology was often more valued. Psychology was perceived as a more “legitimate” profession because it is registered and draws heavily from a positivist epistemology. Despite this, several participants reinforced that their organisational culture, particularly managers, played an important role in valuing all discipline backgrounds: “…some case workers, they can feel like they are a little bit below the psychologist and he [the manager] always says in meetings with the case workers that you are not below them…” (Nina, second interview).
It made a difference when the dominance of the positivist discourse was resisted by managers.

Other participants said that clients and community members tend to have a clearer perception of psychology whereas they do not with social work. Eleven participants reflected on a lack of clarity about social work more broadly. They experienced exchanges throughout the year with colleagues, clients and their own family who did not understand what social work is or does. This was especially evident in hospital settings, where medical staff called upon social workers for unrelated tasks, which James noted in his interviews:

Yeah, when I first stepped into the role I think we were... I don’t know, there were things we were being asked to do that weren’t really social work roles. You didn’t need a four-year degree to do the things that I was being asked to do. (James, final interview)

Some participants said this confusion was linked to the diversity of social work, which they saw as a strength and weakness. Participants stated diversity meant they had greater career opportunities and interests they could pursue because social work “...is so broad, and I can go so many places with it, and there are so many options social work provides, even in terms of clients...” (Chelsea, second interview). However, because of this diversity, it was difficult to define social work: “... but also back at uni they said a lot of social workers themselves can’t explain what a social worker does...” (Claire, final interview)

At times, this impacted on articulating a clear professional identity. For example, when defining social work to others, many participants said they would begin by saying social workers are employed in diverse roles, which made it difficult to define social work.

When participants experienced confusion or misperceptions about social work, it prompted reflection on their professional identity and encouraged them to address these issues:

Well, I think one of the issues, what is a social worker and what do we do here and there’s no clear – I think everyone has a different idea of what a social worker does, and I don’t know that I have a [pause] – I don’t think I could nail down exactly what I do because I do so much; there are so many different
things I do but I think one of the things that’s helped is that I’ve figured out what I don’t do and what’s not my role. (James, final interview)

Some of the participants’ observations reflected transition and adjustment in the practice field, but also managing the wider discourses and perceptions, which impacted on social work.

**Gender discourse.** The final dominant discourse that eight participants reflected on was gender. The participants noted how dominant patriarchal constructions of gender in Australian society influenced how social work is perceived, valued and renumerated. As members of a female-dominated profession, three male participants were prompted to become more mindful of their own gender and experiences of masculinity: “I’ve thought about it sometimes when I’ve been sitting at res [residential] school. Sitting up the back of the class, thinking: ‘There’s only nine guys in here, why am I a social worker?’” (Gary, first interview).

Five female participants reflected on wider gender issues and social work as a female-dominated profession:

> Well, I mean one could imagine…that if social work was a male-saturated field, that it may have a higher standing in the social – in the service sector hierarchy, because it would be more vocal and have a bit, a bit more muscle so to speak… (Isabella, second interview)

Julia experienced the stereotype of being perceived as “cardigan-wearing hippies” (Julia, first and second interviews), and Belinda noted other misperceptions: “Or some people I know, but there’s a whole stereotype of a social worker being really out there and, you know, the red glasses and short hair or...really radical…” (Belinda, first interview).

There was broad agreement amongst these eight participants that gender needs further attention in social work and the wider sector:

> I’m now down the barrel of eight years of study, and if I went to a community organisation, which, I might like to do, but I’m afraid because can I actually survive in this community on $50,000 a year? (Gary, first interview)
There was concern gender inequalities contributed to lower wages for social workers, especially in the non-government sector, as well as there being a misperception that anyone can do social work.

In light of these four dominant discourses – neo-conservativism, managerialism, positivism and gender – nine participants reflected on the importance of establishing a positive reputation through building networks, connections and positive perceptions of who they are:

*It’s part of my responsibility to break that [stereotype] down, so when I identify being a social worker, I’m making a political stand in terms of I get what you people think, and we joke about it in the office. It’s like, oh, I’ve got to go do this and it’s, like, put your cardigan on – we laugh, as we all wear cardigans – so it’s about making a stand that our work is very theoretically based, and we’re really cemented in what we do and social justice and our code of ethics…* (Julia, second interview)

Fook et al. (2000) suggest newly qualified social workers were overly occupied with establishing a reputation in their study; however, participants in my study talked about how the perceptions of others matter, including other social workers and colleagues in multidisciplinary settings:

...you might have a year or maybe two years out, but you’ve got to get out there and start using it. Networking it...social work is really a small [profession]...and you’ve got to get your name and your reputation. (Maggie, first interview)

Similarly to participants’ sense of “doing things right”, the participants were aware of enacting their professional integrity as a social worker as well as having a positive influence on the perceptions of others.
Throughout the interviewing process, participants also reinforced that it was important to foster camaraderie in order to resist dominant discourses and change perceptions of social work. Claire reflected on this, particularly in her first and final interviews:

I’m proud to be a social worker, rather than, the meek and mild “I’m a social worker” … I want people to be proud of being social workers… (Claire, first interview)

... don’t be ashamed, and don’t believe in those stereotypes – it can be whatever we make it and it’s a profession with so many possibilities of the sort of variations it could be in. Yeah, I don’t see that as a weakness. Some people I’ve heard see that as a dilution, but I don’t. I think it’s a fantastic chance to expand the possibilities and open our minds to what it could really be. (Claire, final interview)

The participants argued that a social work identity must be clear across micro, meso and macro contexts. It resides in the individual identity, the collective identity and the wider profession: “Gain confidence, be strong, and believe in ourselves that it’s such a valuable thing that we offer…” (Claire, final interview).

Isabella reflected in all her interviews about having a strong professional identity:

You know there’s a lot of blood, sweat and tears, so to speak that goes there. So there’s a lot more recognition that we could have...and which would hence build a stronger sense of social work identity...if there was more acknowledgement by the other discourses. (Isabella, first interview)

I think social work’s very important, and the stronger social work identity we have, I think the better the chances there are of actually planting that into society more strongly because if we have a stronger collective social work identity, we’re going to have a more powerful voice… (Isabella, second interview)

Their sentiments reflect the observations of Payne (2006), who argues social workers construct their identities in everyday relationships and need to be active in doing so, but participants in my study were interested in also advocating in the wider macro environment.
Support and Development Needs

Based on experiences across the individual, relational, organisational and environmental levels, the participants described support and development needs fundamental to being newly qualified. These needs reflect systemic professional and socio-political structures, which help to create nurturing environments. These support and development needs exist within wider discourses at the environmental level, which frame organisations, inter-agency settings, fields of practice and job roles.

Nurturing environments. Throughout the interviewing process, all participants described how it was important to be supported within nurturing environments that would allow them to grow and develop. A nurturing environment is made up of four components – being valued, autonomy, access to professional development, and structures for maintaining professional self-care (Figure 18).

![Nurturing environment diagram]

Figure 18. Features of a nurturing environment.

Nurturing environments included robust policy frameworks and cultures that fostered positive relationships – where one was safe to ask questions, explore practice, and test out ideas. It was driven by formal and informal mechanisms for support, and learning and development that balanced individual, team, organisational and wider sector needs.
Two ideal examples of experiencing a nurturing environment across the year were articulated by Julia and Cass:

...it’s just around being a feminist working in a feminist organisation – tick...Oh, with these women who are extraordinary and who place value in me as a worker – tick. They’re committed to my learning and my self-care; they make it safe for me to grow and learn – tick. It’s the most outstanding position I could ever ask for as a new grad – they encourage me constantly; hold me when I’m sad and scared, nurture me, slap me when I’m – I think I just spoke to you about [my CEO] being the lioness...she’s like this lioness, so we’re all her cubs and we walk along beside her and when one of us bites the other one, she goes whack....with her big paw, whack – she’s four foot tall, but whack – and then she calls us all in to get closer, she nurtures us and then keeps going…(Julia, final interview)

I am so much more, personally and professionally. I am more...confident... Probably because there are people who trust me, who trust my professional judgement and my professional abilities. I’ve got so many opportunities coming at me with work and further study and learning, and I’m bombarded with opportunity and it’s, like, wow, this is such a great life. (Cass, final interview)

Both described their first-year post-qualification period as highly positive because of these experiences; whereas, others, especially Belinda and Maggie, did not experience nurturing environments. Instead, they experienced workplace bullying and a negative organisational culture, which was informed by wider discourses and perceptions that dehumanised them or undervalued their social work identity:

I feel like a dog’s body as a worker. They identified me as another person to serve a customer, another bum on the seat rather than social worker identity, and I felt like they’ve led me on to believe that there will be a social work position in order for me to stay there...I feel a bit used and that’s why it’s left that sour taste in my mouth. I don’t leave this workplace with good thoughts at this time because I feel that I’ve been used, and when I said, “Look, my back is against the wall, I have to go”, it’s like okay, like there’s no fight for me. (Maggie, second interview)
Belinda captured how she should have been treated:

...and I think it’s hard being a new graduate going in and saying I want this, I want this, I need this, I need this...you don’t want to be like a hassle to them. But then on the other hand, I think they should be supporting you because having a new graduate is a good resource... if I were a manager and I had a new graduate social worker or anyone, you’d want to be...developing their skills and...in a new organisation, like, that’s a fantastic resource for them because they can get that person and teach them their ways... [and] new graduates bring lots of knowledge and skills... (Belinda, final interview)

Her message poignantly details how newly qualified social workers come with strengths and resources, but also need ongoing and formal systemic support so they can grow and develop. For Belinda, there was a major transition gap, going from being a student to a workplace that did not value her professional identity or provide meaningful support. In the end, despite her best efforts, she had little power to overcome these structural issues.

**Being valued.** One component of a nurturing environment relates to being valued as a social worker, especially as wider discourses and perceptions are not always helpful: “...as I’ve touched on that before, within my own workplace [professional social work identity] it’s not acknowledged. It’s not recognised at all...” (Geraldine, final interview).

The majority of participants said they were valued, which contributed towards fostering their professional identities. However, with tightened resources, generic job titles, and the narrowing of roles to focus on individual practice, many participants questioned as other researchers have (Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Ife, 1997), whether the social work profession is valued enough.

For some participants, a lack of recognition for professional identity and being devalued as a social worker occurred in everyday relationships, in the wider organisation, and within the community. For example, Belinda was frequently told by a manager that she was not a social worker in her role. While most of these participants did not experience erosion of identity, they could still see risks in social work being devalued.
An important part of being valued as a social worker involved receiving constructive feedback:

*I think that it’s important for them [employers] to provide regular feedback and for it to be not only constructive feedback but positive feedback, and encouragement and opportunities to make mistakes but with shared responsibility, so that it doesn’t fall on the new grads shoulders completely. And to be accessible and or to have someone that’s accessible as a mentor support person.* (Vivienne, final interview)

Vivienne’s reflection resists placing the burden of risks onto individuals, but rather creating wider nurturing environments based on shared responsibility. As active learners in the newly qualified period, the participants detailed how it was important to be able to receive helpful feedback from a range of sources, such as clients, colleagues, managers, supervisors and social workers, which validated their practice and valued their professional identity.

Several participants reinforced that the individual must be able to value who they are. This includes acknowledging the qualification and honouring personal achievements and strengths:

*I used to base a lot of my foundations on…what people thought of me, rather than what I thought of myself, and when you do that too much, you’re not really “being” – that “being” stuff goes missing…*(Michael, final interview)

These experiences raise questions for employers, managers and policymakers about how systems are framed by policies and cultures that value the professional identities of newly qualified social workers.

*Autonomy.* Having an appropriate level of autonomy as a social worker is an important component of a nurturing environment. Eleven participants described how autonomy should reflect job boundaries, resources and capacities of new practitioners. For Julia, autonomy was recognised in the formal structures of her organisation, which was an exception to most other participants: “...you’re trying to be an autonomous worker and that is part of our organisational culture and policies is that they [management] want us to be autonomous...” (Julia, second interview).
The policy framework and organisational culture encouraged Julia to develop independence and express her professional identity. Cass also experienced an appropriate level of autonomy and saw it as a reflection of trust in her ability, which in turn valued and fostered her professional identity: “That’s empowering, that [autonomy] gives me confidence...and they know that I will come back and ask questions and I will ask them ad nauseum until I’ve got it right in my head” (Cass, second interview).

Participants who experienced a high level of micro-management described their autonomy as stifled: “You don’t get to be as autonomous as you’d like to; there’s that micromanagement, that hierarchy, that contradictory behaviour in the way that [the manager] treats you and people” (Chelsea, final interview).

In some cases it impacted on opportunities for the participants to express their social work identity.

**Professional development.** A practical mechanism for meeting support and development needs is through access to professional development, another component of a nurturing environment. Participants described undertaking activities such as postgraduate study, short courses and training, conferences, seminars, inservices, and team/organisation building. Most participants had consistent access to activities throughout the year. They described professional development as an important need and a contributor to fostering social work identity. To achieve this, it was important to balance organisational interests and individual needs. In some instances, managers unwittingly assumed what might be useful or focused solely on what they believed the organisation needed: “…one of the managers there said to me ‘Oh, go and do this course, it’s great’, but we’d covered it all in university in fourth year, anyway, and I didn’t really find it that helpful…” (Catherine, second interview).

Several participants described that even though they had access to professional development, it did not guarantee that they could engage in activities, especially when there were high workload demands. A few participants had their own budgets or funding placed aside for professional development, but it was often common for organisations to require practitioners to cover most costs, due to a lack of resources and budget cuts, from the wider macro context.
For some participants, professional development was simply not offered at all due to the type of role (casual, contract or lower qualification) or no funding was allocated:

...it’s a bit thin on the ground, and that’s one of the failings of our project...we’re not linked to what they used to call the SAAP training...so we’re not eligible for the partnership pathways, which means we have to pay for everything we go to. And our budget doesn’t allow it. And they’ve actually implemented us a limit...on what project, and how much is allocated to each project. (Geraldine, first interview)

Three participants described that it was also difficult to gain sufficient depth and variety from short professional development activities:

I’m not taking one minute away from these subjects, and I feel that they’re very pertinent to our society, domestic violence, suicide prevention – those sorts of subjects – and mental health. But it seems to be perpetually coming around as the only courses of education that we need all the time, and I’m wondering where the other enriching subjects are, of course, ones that provide a little bit more flesh to a strengths-based training approach...(Gary, final interview)

Some participants commented that there was little time or resources to consolidate their learning or see how theory can be translated into practice. Julia was one of the few participants who had the autonomy to overcome this in the future:

I’ve decided I’m going to do one day a month in – at work – where I have a study day, which is...that’s perfectly good for management; they’re fine with that, so I’ll have a study day once a month, where I sit, and I’ll remove myself from my desk... So I’ll just start to write up notes – my notes – and think about the models and the – I think I need to do that Bernie to start to cement my learning further; grow my roots a bit longer. (Julia, final interview)

Her experience was a good example of being able to tailor her professional development activities to her individual needs, which would be attainable and cost effective. Julia’s plan, as well as other participants’ sentiments, reflects a need for time and space for adequate reflection that Aglias’ (2010) participants struggled to experience. Crucially, Julia was supported by her organisation to achieve her goals, which reinforces the important relationship between the worker and their employer,
as well as the wider macro environment providing adequate funding and resources for professional development.

**Professional self-care.** A final component of a nurturing environment relates to structures for professional self-care. Participants described how self-care included personal and professional mechanisms to maintain wellbeing and long-term commitment to their job and profession. Personal self-care mechanisms included maintaining a healthy lifestyle as well as engaging in social activities, hobbies and/or exercise outside of work. For some, it was also important to reassess their career options and goals.

Within the workplace, professional self-care mechanisms included having access to support and debriefing, including further counselling if necessary; maintaining clear role boundaries; access to leave; having a self-care plan; appropriate access to supervision and professional development opportunities, including time and space at work for reading and reflection; and opportunities to work from home. In addition to these mechanisms, Geraldine had previously advocated for self-care policies, which involved bridging the personal and professional:

> I’d lobbied for [an] exercise hour…and I said it was really important as part of self-care…to actually embed it in as part of the organisational structure. Not as part of lunch hour…or just after work, and they actually agreed to it.

(Geraldine, first interview)

In general, participants stated that they emerged from university study with an appreciation for self-care. Several were highly aware of its importance based on past experiences, but most participants developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for professional self-care during the year. They learnt to individualise self-care to their own context:

> ...it’s all well and good that someone will say to me just go for a walk around the block; yeah, but are you going to go and submit that intervention order because that needs to go in today [be] cause court’s tomorrow, so if you do that for me, they can’t, they’ve got their own stuff so…it doesn’t make it go away, I just come back to it… (Julia, second interview)
Professional self-care had positive impacts on developing a better work–life balance. However, Geraldine highlighted that while she was strongly committed to self-care, it was something that occurred mostly outside of her work:

...probably the most frustrating thing for me is I haven’t...I had scheduled a week off and I haven’t been able to take it... And I know I don’t take lunch breaks, and then I’ll get to a point where yesterday I almost became...I couldn’t do much at all physically...So that actually has a bad consequence, really, a negative consequence. So I think on some levels I come home and that’s where the work stays at work and I try not to think about it; I’ll go swimming, I’ll do whatever I need to do, and I need to get in the garden again, weed again, but build up the garden and do all that sort of stuff... (Geraldine, final interview)

Some participants reinforced the realities of busy workplaces and the possible risks when self-care is done only in personal time, outside of work. Self-care in the workplace is a challenge, but it is possible when appropriate structures are in place. Claire experienced this when a critical incident happened at work:

So I took off a week, and I went to a mindfulness retreat, and I dealt with it fairly well, I think, and I’m feeling, like, now, if that happened again, I would be a lot better equipped... I wasn’t going to do that, but I did take some time off... (Claire, final interview)

Claire realised she needed time to process the experience and was able to:

...and so I went to my doctor and got a medical certificate for some time off, and realised in hindsight how much I needed that time off, and really thought how silly of me to think I wouldn’t need the time off after going through something like that. (Claire, final interview)

The experience had a profound impact on Claire’s understanding of self-care:

...I’ve taken quite a different turn on self-care. I don’t know how to put it except that I’m much more selfish now, and self-care was something that I thought I was doing, but now I’ve got a different take on it. I feel that I was not really tapping into my feelings. I was probably taking off time, or doing things for myself that I thought I should need or that others have said that I need, whereas now I really feel like, okay, I know I need to go kayaking this weekend, or I
know I need to take a four-day weekend. I’m just really better tuned to what my needs are…this is the turnaround in my thinking…I want to keep doing this job, I like my job. What do I need for myself in order to have the strength and…just not be burnt out? I just do not want to be burnt out. And I have been finding since then that my mood has lightened; I’m actually happier in my job, and I’m getting on well with my colleagues, and I am relaxing into it. (Claire, final interview)

Claire demonstrates taking personal responsibility for her self-care, but this would not have been possible without systemic support, which allowed her to have time and space for reflection.

Isabella further emphasised a shared responsibility when reflecting on her experiences of vicarious trauma:

….it was really actually quite comforting [the training], so I thought well, okay, so it’s showing me that my work is affecting my life outside of work; it’s affecting my home life, my social life in more ways than I thought……it’s going to happen to whatever degree, and so…it actually becomes a workplace health and safety issue, and as a result of that, we’ve come back [to work] and said, well, we need to put this into our policies, and it’s a dual responsibility of the worker as well as the workplace because [vicarious trauma] it’s actually a cause of the job. (Isabella, final interview)

For Isabella this realisation was validating as it removed placing blame on her as an individual, for suffering the consequences of vicarious trauma. Instead, she could see that more responsibility was being placed on the entire sector to be more nurturing towards the needs and wellbeing of practitioners. While vicarious trauma is a particular example of workplace risks, social workers experience high levels of stress and burnout (Coffey et al., 2004; van Heugten, 2011). These realities reinforce the importance of professional self-care as a personal and structural responsibility that can be supported by frameworks and cultures that enable practitioners to maintain their wellbeing and long-term employment.

For 11 participants, an important dimension of professional self-care related to workload needs. As active learners, many of them said it was important to be eased
into complex and/or heavier workload levels over time and be well supported during periods of resource constraints:

[A co-worker] the other crisis worker has just gone on five weeks leave. It’s a really long time, so what that means is that I was blessed [our CEO] shut down one of our refuges, took it offline… (Julia, second interview)

Many of the 11 participants described periods of consistently high levels of workload, which could be difficult to manage. An excessive and unrealistic workload was another contributor to burnout and erosion of identity, especially for Belinda and Maggie.

Some participants said that it was important to recognise that newly qualified social workers may have specific workload needs, which could be negotiated through a mutual approach. A good example of this was James, who described changing his workload during the year in order to be more realistic:

And I think for too long I just wanted to do everything for everyone, and, of course, that was dangerous because people see you as the person who the more you say yes, then people just ask you to do more and more and more… but as time goes on you learn how to deal with particular people and you learn the processes… I’m working closely with our manager, the senior social workers and the rest of the team, and my colleagues in the ward from other disciplines to say, oh, this is not just me being a maverick, and going off on my own tangents. It means working with these people and with advice from more experienced people such as… my manager, well, this is where we feel social work, that is, I think maybe it’s strained a little for a while. (James, final interview)

Without the support of his manager, it would not have been possible for James to modify his workload, which would have had further implications for his professional self-care. These experiences raise questions about professional recognition for workload needs for newly qualified social workers.
Discussion

Participants detailed how physical and social environments were a fundamental part of their lived experience, which fits with several authors who argue identity construction is ongoing, fluid, and influenced by multiple factors and social contexts (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Oliver, 2013; Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016). The connection to physical space, including the office and wider geographical location, is noteworthy as the wider literature on the professional identities of newly qualified social workers does not focus on these dimensions.

In my study, the participants reinforced that the physical domain, including aesthetics, geography, environment, and climate, had a connection to their professional identity. For many who had lived in a rural or regional location for many years, their environment was an important part of who they were and influenced their decision to stay even if social work jobs were limited. It was also important because rural practice can have particular challenges with maintaining boundaries and accessing consistent support. Despite this, most of the participants who lived and worked in rural and regional locations described experiencing a positive year.

In relation to the social environment, the participants’ descriptions raise fundamental questions about identity; in examining how the “self” arises and is constructed in relationship to wider structures, especially dominant discourses and perceptions. The participants’ reflections on dominant discourses were consistent with current debates in social work (for example, Stanley & Lincoln, 2016) in terms of generic job roles focused on individual-based work and increases in workloads that include administration. Most participants said their professional identities were not eroded by these dominant discourses, or other perceptions, but had to be managed, challenged and/or resisted throughout the year.

The participants demonstrate what Cameron and McDermott (2007) emphasise, which is that social workers have some agency, but not complete agency, over their lives; they are influenced by their social environment and parts of this can be beyond their control. Therefore, the participants’ stories from my study prompt the profession to consider the multidimensional and interconnected micro, meso and macro layers that can influence the professional identities of newly qualified social workers. The participants’ calls for a strong professional identity and wider leadership and action are consistent with other authors (Asquith et al., 2005; Healy & Meagher, 2004).
participants identified what can happen when social workers influence wider cultures to embrace diverse professional identities. Importantly, they reinforced the need for multidimensional responses that promote social work across the micro, meso and macro layers. It is not simply an individual effort or a responsibility for the AASW, but a responsibility for social workers individually, collectively and professionally.

The narrative of social work not being understood and being diverse raises questions about how social work is viewed across all the strata of Australian society, including educators and the wider profession. Psychologists are employed in diverse roles and settings and yet participants stated that community members appear to have a clearer understanding of what they do. This same kind of clarity with other professions and the wider community was elusive for participants in this study. When describing how they would define social work, participants often started by saying they work in diverse roles. Is there a risk of social workers becoming more defined by their roles as opposed to a common value and ethical base that allows for diversity? Participants’ descriptions relate well to Mackay and Zufferey’s (2015) study, where they explored the varying discourses educators impart to students, some of which can be contradictory. Participants in my study provide some light on this in that several were aware of how their own educators defined social work as a diverse profession, which created some confusion in expressing who they were to others. Perhaps educators and the wider profession need to focus more clearly on the core aspects of social work that are then transferable to diverse roles when they are teaching students and communicating what the profession is to the wider community. As recommended by Mackay and Zufferey (2015), further research in this area is warranted.

In terms of support and development needs, participants fostered their professional identities within nurturing environments that valued who they were and facilitated continued growth and development. Their experiences and ideas encourage policymakers, employers and the AASW to consider frameworks that foster nurturing environments based on valuing the professional identities of newly qualified social workers; providing an appropriate level of autonomy; and ensuring adequate access to professional development; and self-care mechanisms. In particular, workload needs could be further explored. This topic has been highlighted in Australia (Agllias, 2010), New Zealand (Hunt et al., 2016) and England (Bradley, 2008), where it was recommended that newly qualified practitioners should be eased into their caseload according to their ability. The observations and reflections of the participants in my
study suggest that it would be worthwhile further investigating workload needs of Australian newly qualified social workers during their initial post-qualification period.

The participants accessed and enjoyed a range of professional development activities that contributed to their lifelong learning and professional identity. However, their experiences raise questions about how professional development is valued at the macro level, especially by government funding bodies. In the participants’ workplaces, funding for programs did not consistently include access to professional development, or it was cut during times of resource constraints. When resources for professional development are not prioritised or practitioners are expected to mostly fund it themselves, what message is that really sending? If practitioners’ support and development needs are not embedded or prioritised, will they be able to function well enough and provide the best possible service to their communities in the long term? Consequently, gaining a better balance between practitioners’, organisational and societal needs could be further explored. The findings from this study complement the calls from others in Australia who argue for a greater focus on professional development needs (Healy et al., 2015), and for Australian employers and the profession to consider how they can systemically recognise newly qualified social workers, and what multilayered support and development mechanisms are needed for this cohort (Cheron-Sauer, 2012). Would it be enough to only look at strategies within organisations? These findings prompt social workers to ask how professional and policy systems can help to sustain newly qualified social workers, no matter where they are employed. A multidimensional focus is needed, with specific attention on the lived experience of professional identity so that it is valued and fostered.

**Chapter Summary**

The wider physical and social environment framed and impacted the meso (relational and organisational) and micro (individual) layers of experience for participants. In particular, dominant discourses and perceptions impacted on these newly qualified social workers by devaluing their professional identity, and constraining resources that were needed for them to thrive. Despite these challenges, the participants were committed to enacting their professional identity and not allowing discourses and perceptions to limit their sense of self. The stories from the participants indicated that they had a range of support and development needs that should be investigated.
further. These needs included funding for professional development and recognition of professional identity.
Chapter 12
Consolidating the First Year Post-Qualification

This chapter consolidates the themes of the previous chapters by exploring two areas of inquiry – participation in the study and advice for others. As a situated researcher, I intend to honour the co-construction relationship, as Bell (2013) advocates, which involves exploring the meanings participants attached to the research process and centralising their experiential knowledge. These meanings will be outlined in the first part of the chapter, where I will explore their motivations to participate in the study, and what impacts the interview process had on the participants, especially in relation to critical reflection. The second part promotes their experiential knowledge by detailing the advice the participants would give to stakeholders, including emerging graduates and social work students, employers, educators, and the wider profession. Their advice crystallises the micro, meso and macro dimensions of their lived experience.

Motivations to Participate in the Study

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked why they were motivated to join, and then stay in the study. Their motivations were largely sustained throughout the interviewing process. They had multiple reasons for being involved in the study, many of which revolved around wanting critical reflection to gain greater insight into their journey. Four themes emerged: identity development; helping others; mutual help between participant and researcher; and other reasons.

Identity development as motivation to participate. Sixteen participants consistently commented on being motivated to actively gain from the research experience, especially for their professional identity. Participation was seen as an opportunity to critically reflect and develop self-awareness. It was not simply regarded as a research interview where they would impart knowledge to me; they wanted to actively gain from it themselves.

Nine participants said that they wanted to reflect on where they had come from (past) and where they are in the present. This included articulating how they had changed since university and what the experience of transition was like, as well as to benefit from the opportunity this study would provide for critical reflection: “...it’s allowed
me to question where I’m at in my career...my job...my position, and where I want to be, what do I want to do...” (Geraldine, second interview).

Over the period of the year, the interviews prompted Geraldine to think about her present experiences and where she might like to head in the future. Geraldine, amongst others, was motivated to continue with the interviews as part of developing that self-awareness.

As part of their reflection on their journey, Chelsea and Nina believed research participation could provide an added layer of support and supervision:

“I was also really motivated because I thought to myself, this is...another support...I could have during...my first year, so, almost like a type of supervision...Even though it’s not necessarily supervision, but a way for me to gain experience and learn things as well…” (Nina, first interview)

They accepted that this did not mean I was a supervisor, but they could see from the interview questions how they could critically reflect in a way that was similar to processes in the supervision relationship.

Seven participants were motivated to specifically explore and develop their social work identities. They were passionate about how their professional identity was present, relevant and/or distinct:

“...well I guess I’ve been thinking about this interview for a while, ever since we spoke recently...because it’s sort of forcing – not forcing me – but making me think about where I am at as a social worker, and thinking about my own identity, and what I think might be useful, especially because I feel like it hasn’t been going well…” (Belinda, second interview)

Belinda was particularly motivated to reflect on her experiences and become self-aware of how the workplace bullying was impacting on her professional identity. Isabella was motivated to explore the relationship between her role identity as a project officer and her professional identity: “…I felt perhaps in...my role...what does it do to identity? Is it going to erode faster, or is it going to be harder to hold on to [professional identity]?” (Isabella, first interview).

Isabella has articulated the possibility of tensions between her role and profession. Healy (2009) raises concerns about professional identities being undermined in these
contexts, as competencies are emphasised within generic roles. Isabella was motivated to reflect on these dimensions because she was concerned her professional identity may be diminished if her role identity did not allow her to fully incorporate aspects of social work theory and practice.

Helping others. The second most talked about motivation was an interest in seeing the research used to help others, especially emerging graduates and the wider profession. Nine participants were motivated to share their experiences for others to learn from, especially as part of preparation for practice. They hoped future newly qualified social workers could have someone to relate to and become further aware of diverse experiences and possible challenges: “...be able to contribute to the other new social work grads hopefully in the future so that they know what they will be into when they go into the profession” (Rueben, second interview); “I hope I can say something that helps someone else” (Vivienne, second interview).

More specifically, Maggie and Damon wanted emerging graduates to be aware of possible unexpected realities – for example, challenges with job seeking:

...I guess get my experience across to others who are thinking about doing social work... And other people I’ve talked to say they had to wait two years before they had their...first actual social work job, so, yeah just knowing, not hearing about that at all, during uni, and then sort of finding about it now is a bit rough… (Damon, first interview)

Michael was motivated to share the experience of being a rural social worker. He believed newly qualified social workers should be aware of the challenges they can face in rural settings such as having realistic expectations and appropriate motivations for practice: “... whether it’s fortunate or unfortunate, it’s you have to have a certain style or be able to have a different approach to things to actually be able to do decent work” (Michael, first interview).

Six participants described an interest in the research being used to develop future support for newly qualified social workers. This was best summarised by Jessica:

... I think that would be really helpful for people... who are just coming out and maybe don’t have much industry experience other than the prac they’ve done, to be able to get the sort of support they need to help them, I guess, develop a little bit more around that professional identity stuff and navigate the...
challenges, and often the ethical dilemmas that can come into...some types of work in particular. (Jessica, first interview)

Some participants had specific ideas about their experiences being used for providing support such as during the initial transition from study to practice: “If, there is...I guess, more guidance, more...assistance...a clearer path that can help...new graduates. Then, even further information” (Cass, first interview).

Cass was uncertain about the first step: “...when I step into the workplace...what foot do I step with?” (Cass, first interview). Her experience coincided with Clapton’s (2013) interest in universities playing a role to support new practitioners to fill the gap between completing study and gaining the first position.

Belinda and Isabella emphasised formal, ongoing support for maintaining social work identity:

...some sort of social work mentoring one on one or, or just to keep that – the social work – because there are a lot of people in the profession who are doing the same work that don’t have the social work background. And I guess finding what, how we are different and what we can bring to that, but also sort of keeping that – the idea – that you’re a social worker and that identity current. (Belinda, first interview)

...if...there is quite a threat to social work professional identity, I’d like to see that be taken up by the AASW. (Isabella, first interview)

James’s motivation was also influenced by his manager and team, whom he made aware of my research. They wanted to see the findings from my study and how it could inform recruitment, retention and development of social work identity amongst staff:

Here we take quite a few new graduates... it is difficult to get social workers in this area; we tend to take graduates straight out... so...it’s an interesting experience for us to see...how can we foster that sense of identity. (James, first interview)

Such interests coincide with the aims of the study as part of understanding lived experience and using the findings for further research and dialogue.
Geraldine and Gary were motivated to see this research used for valuing social work in the wider community:

*I don’t know whether this is an aim of the project, but I’d like to see a much bigger picture, the valuing of…social workers in particular.* (Geraldine, first interview).

*Well, I think…it’s a great idea, a great thing to be doing, the research… during the course of my degree I’ve…had personal reflections about where is social work headed. Particularly in the...global politics that we’re living in at the moment, where less is being spent on the care of people and…I’ve had quite a ponder about where social work might be headed. So, drawing back…I feel that...this research brings back to...possible new directions or perhaps even new learning for social workers, it will be a great thing.* (Gary, first interview)

Participants reflected on how social workers both individually and collectively were valued and positioned in the sector, especially in light of dominant discourses. Geraldine’s motivation complements McMichael’s (2000) findings, where participants talked about how social work is undervalued in health. Geraldine identified a need for social work to be valued in the wider society. Gary’s reflections link to contemporary issues in social work such as how a social work identity, based on beliefs and values that are unpopular within global politics, is expressed, which in turn has implications on the valuing of social work. By actively participating in this study, both were demonstrating a desire to make positive contributions to the valuing of social work.

**Mutual help between participant and researcher.** Eight participants described wanting to help me as the researcher. They talked about a desire for reciprocity based on giving and taking:

*...I just think sometimes it’s important to give back or to give…and if I was in your position I would want people to be generous enough to do that…and I like to live my life, I guess, so it’s a personal thing, I guess…* (Julia, first interview)
...it has potential benefits for me as well as you; it’s reciprocal, so I think it’s important to see it through and just to track my own progress. (Catherine, second interview)

For Maggie, it was about helping me and the CSU social work discipline: “…we need to have like CSU on the map and say, hey, we’ve got great academics and great researchers that come from CSU…” (Maggie, first interview).

Participants were aware of the mutually beneficial dimensions of the co-construction relationship, where each could gain from the process. For many, it reflected their value base as a helper and they derived a sense of meaningful purpose by helping me. Their statements also reflected the intent of the theoretical framework, as the participants were respected equals, engaged in the process as subjects not objects to take knowledge from for my own purposes.

**Other reasons for participation.** Four other reasons for participation were raised: the importance of research, learning about research, recruitment, and ongoing commitment.

Five participants said they were motivated to participate because research is a valuable, knowledge-building activity in itself:

*I think the knowledge that’s gained from any type of research work is usually good and helpful and insightful…* (Jessica, first interview)

*I think research is very important; we neglect research to some extent. Maybe that’s not a fair thing to say. But if you look at all the other parts of say, social work, I think we spend more time on those matters rather than research.*

(Vivienne, second interview)

They described a commitment to inherently important social work activities such as research. Complementing this sentiment, four participants were motivated to learn about what it is like to do doctoral research as they might want to undertake a PhD in the future.

In terms of recruitment, Cass stated that she also became motivated after seeing my presentation during a lecture: “You drew me in, it seemed exciting. And it was something that was, I just have to be involved in that, how could you not?” (Cass, first interview).
Her experience highlights how I was a situated researcher as my enthusiastic and passionate communication positively influenced Cass.

Finally, six participants were motivated to stay in the study through a sense of commitment:

_One is commitment. I committed to it, so even if I didn’t feel like being a part of it, and I know I have the option to drop out, I’d probably stay committed because I’d like to see the project go through. I think it’s fantastic work that you’re doing…_ (Isabella, second interview)

Damon and Julia also stated their commitment was helped by participation not being too onerous:

_Yeah, and it hasn’t been a big commitment, Bernie. If you were in my face every week, I’d be like go away, I’m too busy [both laugh]. It hasn’t been an intrusive process, it’s been a very respectful process and I’m actually interested in my journey as well._ (Julia, second interview)

This statement indicates that the theoretical framework had been honoured because the research process was respectful and appropriate to her needs. Others went on to say they were committed because of the opportunity to reflect on themselves and the value they saw in the research. It reflected their desire for development and living up to their social work values.

**Impacts of Participation in the Study**

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if there was anything they had gained from the conversation. Three themes emerged from their responses: opportunities for meaningful reflection; clarification about identity; and therapeutic and emotional impacts. Participants described impacts across multiple areas, which were similar to their motivations to participate.

**Opportunities for reflection as a benefit of study participation.** The most frequently discussed benefit of participating, across the year, was that it created opportunities for meaningful reflection. All participants described how the interview exchanges facilitated deeper reflection, which helped to realise their motivations to participate.
Four participants drew parallels between the interview experience and supervision. The interview provided an opportunity to critically reflect in ways that were similar to the reflective functions of supervision. A good example was Catherine, who stated in her final interview that her current supervision was inadequate, and our interview process was exactly what she needed. Generally professional identity did not come up in supervision or when reflecting with others, and so it was useful to reflect with me:

...it’s so good to have somebody who is interested in my identity as a professional. It’s not something that comes up in supervision; it’s not something that comes up from a colleague: “So you’re a professional now, Cass, how is that for you?” (Cass, final interview)

The participants’ experiences indicate that the interview schedules contained useful questions for critical reflection and were an important way to further articulate social work identity.

Many of the participants also described how the interviews gave them time and space to get out of their everyday world and deeply reflect:

I think it’s really good for me to reflect on my work and on my professional life because it’s...sometimes you get so busy you don’t spend much time doing that and so it’s given me an opportunity to do that. (Vivienne, second interview)

Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to reflect at this level on social work identity. Also, the longitudinal design allowed them to compare experiences between the past and present:

Oh I think it’s good to just stop and look at what’s transpired and, yeah, just reflect on how things are now compared to the way they were...and it makes that stand out a lot more by talking about it and because you’ve been following along [laughs], it’s nice to be sharing a conversation around it because [I] probably wouldn’t do that otherwise. (Vivienne, final interview)

The participants raised the importance of continuity within the research process and how the interviews were an ongoing feature of their journeys over the year. Vivienne’s comment captures my presence in the research as well because I got to know participants and was able to bring knowledge from our previous interviews. It was beneficial for them to engage with someone familiar with their story who could
actively contribute to the reflective process. I became another external reference point to social work, which enabled the participants to reflect on their professional identity.

Finally, many participants discussed ongoing impacts of the research process as they continually reflected now and into the future: “...I’ve been conscious of the fact that these interviews will come up, and so, I suppose, I’ve been trying to think about it and have some constructive input” (James, second interview); “…it’s interesting [be]cause I think there’s been some really good questions and, maybe in a day or so, that I’ll think about it if there will be some more stuff” (Gary, first interview).

The longitudinal design facilitated sustained reflection and longer-term impacts that benefited participants’ development of identity. It was important to have a meaningful relationship that allowed for deeper, long-term reflection that brought professional identity into sharper focus.

Clarification about identity. The research study provided meaningful opportunities to critically reflect, but what exactly did the participants gain from those opportunities? Participants described how they were able to clarify and/or consolidate their professional identity through the research process, which complemented their transition and adjustment to professional identity. In terms of clarity, 13 participants described gaining greater clarity on thoughts and ideas about their professional identity:

It’s like a lecture. I used to love the lectures (both laugh). I love it. (Both laugh). It’s that mind-expanding stuff, and that, and also clarifying...new insights that I’ve come up with, and thought, oh yeah, that’s right, that works for me. So I suppose that contributes then to my professional identity. (Cass, first interview)

…it’s made me think about me, and about my profession and what I’m doing and why I’m doing it, and it’s a good thing… (Cass, second interview)

I just love it – I don’t want it to end. I want you to come back in six months and see how I’m going… (Cass final interview)

There were individual dimensions to this experience. For example, Nina was motivated to reflect on her distinct social work identity and described achieving some clarification on this: “…yeah, just sort of started the motion of thinking about social
work and what it is” (Nina, first interview); “...since I did the first interview, I’ve sort of taken more notice of things in my role now that are kind of social work based...” (Nina, second interview).

The research process was another important part of her journey of transition and adjustment to her professional identity.

For several participants, there was unexpected but very useful clarification as well: “So today has really enabled me to unpack a lot of thinking around the social work identity, and I didn’t realise that actually there’s a stronger identity there than I thought there was” (Isabella, second interview).

Maggie and Jessica found it was useful to go over past challenging experiences with an external person, because new and greater clarity emerged:

...you know when you’re just talking off the cuff and you’re in that moment and you’re just reeling off things, or you’ve asked me a question that I’ve never considered, so I’m having this moment where I’m pausing and looking out the window and I’m going “oh, yeah, okay, all right, yeah”. (Maggie, second interview)

This adds weight to the benefit of having opportunities to critically reflect on professional identity in that it was useful to engage with someone over a longer period of time who was external to their everyday world. Maggie’s comment also reflects the dynamic and co-constructed nature of the interview process. I was not simply eliciting information from her; the questions I asked prompted Maggie to stop, reflect and clarify her journey and identity further. We both mutually benefited from the experience as we each gained greater clarity about the lived experience of professional identity.

In terms of consolidation, eight participants described they were able to build on clarity by consolidating their thoughts about professional identity over time: “It’s...made me consolidate...a lot about what I’m doing...where I’ve been so far...there were reflections that weren’t...necessarily covered through practicums but should have been, I guess” (Gary, first interview); “Okay, what I’ve got out of this. I think it’s actually solidified some of the stuff that I mentioned... that I’ve been thinking about” (Geraldine, first interview).
The pieces of the story were coming together: “Consolidated and then you are able to – it’s almost like this, wow – that is my journey and that’s the truth of my journey, and I feel really happy about that” (Cass, final interview); “But it’s also good to consolidate what I’ve done, and where I’m at the moment and, have a bit of a picture of…what could come up in the future” (Vivienne, first interview).

For many, the research process became important for verbalising and processing their social work identity and experiences during the first year through guided reflection.

Complementing these experiences, six participants described identifying ideas or plans for future action. They said that the interviewing process had prompted greater clarity about what they could do in the immediate future such as verbalising values (Vivienne, first interview), reflecting on motivations to join social work (Catherine, first interview), and working on their development: “...it always gives me something...to go away and think about more while I am working...I think being conscious of being a bit more confident with my skills” (Nina, second interview).

Both Belinda and Rueben were interested in working on their relationships with their managers. As our interview unfolded, Belinda decided to place a time limit on achieving improvement because of her difficult experiences:

I guess that more solidifies my need to either work on things to improve with this new manager and if that doesn’t work, to make the decision for myself for my own personal health and mental health and stability and sanity, too. But also for my professional growth, and that it needs to be a focus as well; that it’s those two aspects that I would need to move on to something different…

(Belinda, second interview)

Isabella regularly took notes during our interviews so she could capture reflections and identify actions she could undertake to foster her professional identity:

...But through talking to you I’ve worked out, well, actually I do have more power than I think I have; I can make suggestions and recommendations in our new work place when we...go there. Yeah, it’s been great, thanks. (Isabella, second interview)

These stories indicate the research experience had direct and longer-term benefits as some participants were able to gain clarity but also take further action that could be of
benefit to their journey. They were active contributors who gained from the process, which they were motivated to achieve throughout the three interviews.

**Therapeutic and emotional impacts.** The final impact of participation in the study related to therapeutic and emotional impacts, which three participants talked about. At their second interviews, Maggie and Julia referred to the experience being like a counselling session. While both emphasised it was like counselling, it impacted them differently. Maggie had just resigned from her position and was now walking into the unknown:

*I feel like you’ve been the pseudo counsellor for me. I feel bad... because I guess by telling you the story and then you analysing it and then you, I don’t know, I feel that I hoped I’m giving you something to work with…* (Maggie, second interview)

Her comment shows how the type of questioning can have a therapeutic impact and raise concerns in participants. It also demonstrates how the interview can have different meanings for participants at different times. Given the personal and sometimes painful nature of some of the conversations, it was important to be transparent and respectful about the boundaries as a situated researcher.

Julia’s experience was overwhelmingly positive and the interviews were an opportunity to share and reflect:

...*I do it [reflection] all the time and then sit and consolidate that and to give that to you it’s almost like a therapy session. Does that make sense? ...it’s a good therapy session not a bad one.* (Julia, second interview)

Maggie and Julia’s comments are understandable considering that the co-construction relationship was built on communication skills such as active listening. The type of questioning meant discussing personal dimensions of their lived experience in a critically reflective way. Their experiences are a reminder for researchers to carefully negotiate the research relationship and check participants’ meanings of the experience.
In terms of emotional impacts, Geraldine talked about the highs and lows of our second interview:

*Actually, today felt a little bit like a roller-coaster, can I say? These last few hours. It has... felt like the full gamut... and it has had its intensities and I mean it was great catching up earlier with a bit of political discussion that was really nice. I guess for me this has been a really interesting process.* (Geraldine, second interview)

She returned to this experience in her final interview and described how the second interview was draining but worthwhile:

*And possibly we could’ve cancelled, but in some ways, in hindsight, I’m not sorry we didn’t cancel it. I’m glad we continued with the process. And today it just feels like closure a little bit. It just feels like, yeah, okay, you know what, it’s been a 12-month journey.* (Geraldine, final interview)

Finally, Maggie experienced sadness as an emotional impact during her second interview: “I feel like I don’t know, I sort of, or something, because I haven’t started a social work position. I feel I don’t know, like, that I haven’t left those starting blocks” (Maggie, second interview).

After sharing her hopes and goals with me in the first interview, Maggie then described stalling and a sense of failure to progress in her second interview. Maggie described while there was no overt pressure from me in the first interview, there was a sense of excitement and hope we both shared. Maggie said it was difficult at first to undertake the second interview and discuss her experiences. Maggie was also concerned the findings would be skewed because of her negative experiences. I reassured Maggie that participation was voluntary and the research was about capturing diverse lived experience.

These examples highlight how discomfort in participants was a reality that needed to be respectfully addressed. Several participants experienced stressful work environments during their post-qualification period, which meant interviews covered those details. In these cases, I reinforced with participants that they did not have to answer questions they were uncomfortable with and we could stop at any time. At the end of these interviews, I checked whether there was an impact from our conversation and confirmed that there were support mechanisms around them during this time.
Two participants experienced stressful events that prompted me to offer to postpone or cancel their interviews. The voluntary nature of the interview process was emphasised as well as their needs took priority over mine. In each case, the participants chose to continue.

Another participant revealed during an interview that they had experienced a negative exchange with a colleague before we had begun, and it was impacting on them in that moment. In light of this, the interview was stopped. Together, we identified support mechanisms for processing the experience as per the information sheet and participant support document given to participants during recruitment. When the participant indicated that the matter had been resolved for now, the interview resumed at their request. Once again, support mechanisms were reviewed with the participant at the end of the interview.

These examples show how the interview process must have depth and that complexities must be managed carefully. Ethical research is not simply based on prior thought that occurs when applying for approval. It unfolds throughout the whole research process and must be based on transparent communication and respect for participants as active subjects.

**Advice from Participants**

To honour their experiential knowledge, participants were asked at the end of each interview what advice they would give to others. In the first two interviews, the question was open ended and participants chose who they would direct their advice towards. In the final interview, they were asked specifically about advice they would give to key stakeholders based on who they had discussed in interviews one and two including, themselves, students, other newly qualified social workers, educators, employers, wider society and the profession.

**Advice for emerging newly qualified social workers and students.** In all the interviews, the majority of advice was directed towards future newly qualified social workers and social work students. Participants were motivated to share their experiences for the benefit of those studying and transitioning into the field. They encouraged others to learn about their journeys in order to take away important lessons including being assertive to pursue one’s needs. Once again, the participants reiterated that the qualification is only one step in the journey, and that one has to
make the most of it: “...it's a great achievement to complete a degree and get it done, and now the hard work begins” (Michael, second interview); “...have a really open and accepting attitude because when you come out, you're going to be hit with, maybe, some – I was hit with such a big realisation about how much I didn't know” (Julia, final interview).

Several participants advised to be active in building a social work identity and not lose sight of core values:

I think for newly qualified social workers...stand true to what the core ideals that underpin social work and don’t let anything erode that. (James, second interview).

Have a good mentor, get plenty of support and it's about balance, exercise, eating well, socialising, work within work hours if you can [giggles]; it’ll be there tomorrow. And don’t let go of your own values...because they are who you are. (Vivienne, final interview)

They advised emerging graduates to be critically reflective of difficult realities they may face in practice as a newly qualified social worker and be able to use strengths and resources to be effective.

Advice to self. In the final interview, participants were asked if they would give any particular advice to themselves if they were to begin the first-year post-qualification journey again. Most participants talked about similar advice they would give to students, including the importance of self-care, having self-belief, maintaining a sense of humour, and being a proactive lifelong learner:

Probably not to take myself so damn seriously...remember the humour. I think there was a gap there when I actually forgot how to laugh. (Geraldine, final interview)

Don’t be hard on yourself; give yourself time to develop, to grow within the role. (Claire, final interview)

I think the thing that I really thought about 12 months or 16 months ago was that I didn’t want to lose that element of lifelong learning. Because the exams
are finished and the assessments are finished, don’t think you know it all.
(Catherine, final interview)

Three participants (Belinda, Chelsea and Jessica) stated that with hindsight they would not have taken their job: “Honestly, I’d probably say don’t just take the job because you got offered it. Go to the other two interviews” (Chelsea, final interview).

Belinda and Damon would explore external supervision or ways to incorporate more critical reflection into practice, for example:

And maybe seek out supervision, like outside of it – although I don’t know how easy that is. I know you can do stuff through the AASW, but as a new graduate, you don’t really have the money. (Belinda, final interview)

This was consistent with advice to other newly qualified social workers and students, especially around being critically reflective.

Maggie advised being mindful of unexpected realities and socio-cultural influences:

Expect the unexpected. [Long pause] I would have said to myself you can fight as hard as you want, but in the end some things are beyond your control, and even if you try to rectify them, it’s still beyond your control, but at least you’ve given it a go… (Maggie, final interview)

One exception to the group was James, who stated he would not give any specific advice:

Probably nothing. I think I had to go through this process….no spoilers, the reason I am where I am is that I’ve learnt these things, and I had to learn them; I couldn’t be told, I had to learn them. (James, final interview)

There were no easy shortcuts as James believed he had to go through the highs and lows, as an experiential learner, so he could gain the most from the journey.
Advice for educators. Participants shared ideas, feedback and advice for CSU social work educators, especially in terms of preparing future graduates. Once again, participants talked about the transformative impacts of their education and found most academics to be inspiring, passionate, genuine, supportive and helpful during their journey, which they advised their educators to continue doing:

...be kind to your students [laughs]; social work lecturers are the kindest lecturers I’ve ever come across, which is really nice. Just keep encouraging that edge, that cutting edge like greening social work, that on the cusp [knowledge]… (Isabella, final interview)

...you have to be able to inspire people to be passionate about what they’re learning, and if you can’t do that, it’s difficult… (Catherine, final interview)

Other participants encouraged educators to be mindful of new trends and areas where students and graduates need assistance such as reflecting on professional identity, and providing support during the transition from university. Several participants advised educators to consider providing formal support to newly qualified social workers to reduce the transition gap:

....some sort of a new graduate program maybe where there’s… I don’t know who would organise it, whether it’s the AASW or the university, where it brings new graduates back….like to social work, and talking, theories and practice and how everyone’s going with that… (Belinda, final interview)

In terms of curriculum delivery, participants suggested that their educators consolidate and build on strengths, which will contribute to graduates’ preparation and professional identity, especially during field placement and in residential schools. They appreciated access to online lectures and a third session (trimester) for studying, which provided flexibility. For some, these face-to-face and online experiences were crucial for distance students, who were geographically dispersed from one another, and many of them lived in rural areas, which could be isolating at times. It was important for them to be connected to the campus and other students.
Participants encouraged educators to also be mindful of how to assist students to translate theory into practice and demonstrate to the students the practical dimensions of what they were learning. For Michael, this included involving people currently practising in the field:

...they need to provide people with realistic stuff that’s going on now...get someone that’s doing it in the field... A lot of people when they don’t have any practical experience...need to hear practical stories. They don’t work well in just the theory case A, case B sort of thing… (Michael, final interview)

Some particular topics participants would advise their educators to explore with emerging graduates as part of preparation and transition to the social work field are as follows:

- Whether they should join the AASW
- In-depth knowledge about Indigenous practice
- How to manage organisational conflict, especially with managers
- How to access supervision
- How to be a lifelong learner as a new graduate
- How to undertake effective job seeking
- Explore professional identity, including future trends and directions for the profession
- Critically reflect on gender issues in the profession

One participant also advised educators to be more mindful of discriminatory practices: “They were faced with a disability and they didn’t cope with it, they didn’t see potential...they put me in a box. Don’t put me – don’t put people in boxes, it doesn’t work” (Name withheld at request of participant).

This participant had experiences where it was assumed they could not undertake certain activities, or they were incapable. Given their experience, the participant reinforced that educators need to critically reflect in order to challenge their assumptions and focus on what one is capable of doing.
In her final interview, Claire reflected there was not much more her educators could have done as firsthand experience was essential during the initial post-qualification period:

*I actually think they did a really good job in trying to prepare us. I don’t think they could have done much more. I think that it’s a job that you’ve just got to get out there and do, and I’m very grateful that in social work we have such long prac. I know it’s a pain to be working for nothing, and it’s very hard sometimes, but I just can’t imagine any better way to do it. It’s just so valuable.*

(Claire, final interview)

The participants highlighted that lecturers have a crucial role to play in student development, which reflects the findings from Terum and Heggen (2015), where quality relationships were found to be an important dimension to study experiences. While some of the participants’ advice will be specific to CSU (for example, the trimester system), much of it is generic and would be useful for other social work educators to reflect on.

**Advice for employers.** In their final interview, 15 participants encouraged employers to recognise the capabilities of newly qualified social workers, which for one participant was also about avoiding discriminatory practices: “...*look past the disability, or look past the barriers and look for potential...*” (Name withheld at request of participant).

The participants advised employers to provide consistent short-term and long-term support, which includes constructive feedback and encouragement, and systemic mechanisms such as a comprehensive orientation process and ongoing supervision and professional development:

*I think it [post-qualification period] definitely needs to be supported. I think it’s just too much for new graduates to not have a constant support, just available if needed.* (Nina, final interview)

...*you have to give social workers time, especially new grads, whether you’re young or whether you’re old; you need time to settle into the role...* (Michael, final interview)
[remember]...it could be very new and I guess that most people don’t realise that it could take lots to teach them at the start…it’s trial and error stuff and – I’m not really sure...just being understanding that it’s all fairly new and it doesn’t click into place straight away. (Damon, final interview)

These comments emphasise initial support and development needs for when newly qualified social workers are job seeking and finding their feet, but also providing ongoing, longer support over the whole period. Isabella and Jessica advised employers to know the individual and their particular needs for support:

"I think it’s really important to identify for them, so consult with them and identify with them how they learn best, how they take on the information because everybody learns differently." (Jessica, final interview).

Ask them what they need to do to maintain their professional practice and because what you might hear could be that it’s good for the new graduate to practise 15 to 20 minutes of journal writing before they finish their shift, to not answer phones, or just to take that time out for some reflection before the end of the day. (Isabella, final interview)

James agreed with providing time for reflection and further emphasised the importance of having a sustainable workload:

"...give them time to think and reflect, allow them the time to do that. Things worked out really well for me because I’ve got a really good team, I’ve got a really good manager, I’ve got a very supportive crew, and when things were getting a bit out of hand with regard to my workload and the referrals that I had, it was good to be able to have a manager who said look this is not sustainable, you can’t do all this." (James, final interview)

It was advised that newly qualified social workers should be seen as an asset: “…and...employers [should be supporting] new graduate social workers as a good investment...” (Belinda, final interview), where they have a lot to offer, but are developing as lifelong learners:

"They’ve got fresh eyes, they’ve got fresh knowledge, they’ve got up-to-date knowledge, they’re trained to critically think to high heaven. Use them, you’ve
got someone who’s come on board with incredible skills; don’t let them go stale; you’ve actually got a pretty good weapon. (Isabella, final interview)

For Cass and Gary, they wanted employers to consider the whole person and professional during job seeking:

...To look for not only their abilities to be able to perform that role... [ask] what are their professional values...I will go back to social justice again because that’s my thing at the moment – what do they believe? What do they believe from their professional stance? (Cass, final interview)

...life skills are very important. A lot of the questions that employers ask, maybe they, they’re a bit guided by what they can ask, but they’re very related to their practice experience and your approach and skills base and experience. But no, I think life histories can be of an advantage sometimes, too. (Gary, final interview)

They advised employing someone who is a good fit for the organisation: “[as] you not only have to look at the qualification, you have to look at the person...” (Julia, final interview). These statements also reflect the importance of embracing and valuing the professional identity of social workers, and what they can bring as a whole person. Claire extended this advice by emphasising respect for newly qualified social workers:

Listen to them...Because they’re not jaded yet, so listen to the world of possibilities they could bring.... Harness that [energy]. It’s a great thing to be idealistic – open your minds to the possibilities that could bring instead of just cutting it off and saying, no, you learn the way we do it. I’d love managers to listen to their staff more in general. (Claire, final interview)

Maggie emphasised respect, which included being surrounded by those who provide support: “By giving you good advice; by helping you professionally; not belittling you; they’re good because they know their boundaries. They know their roles, and they’re smart enough not to impose that on you...” (Maggie, final interview).

The advice participants provided emphasised shared responsibilities for their journey; it was a journey they did not experience alone, and as developing lifelong learners,
they needed systemic and varied support that maintained and strengthened their commitment to growth and development.

**Advice for wider society and the profession.** At the macro level, participants directed their advice to wider society and the profession itself. Seven participants wanted wider society, including government, other disciplines and community members to value social work, and understand what the profession can do: “...there’s a lot more recognition that we [social work] could have...and which would hence build a stronger sense of social work identity...if there was more acknowledgement...by the other discourses” (Isabella, first interview).

As part of achieving this, five participants would like the Australian social work profession to advocate with key stakeholders regarding the visibility and value of social work as well as within the profession itself:

*I would like to see more social work action in the news. I’d like to see more that social workers are lobbying for this, or social workers have said this or the association...or achieved this.* (Isabella, first interview)

*I think [registration] it probably needs to happen. I think there are a lot of people that are calling themselves...social workers that...have all sorts of qualifications. I’m sure they’re very good. I’m sure they do a cracker job....[but] if anyone can do anything...it really dilutes the idea of what a social worker is, and what they do, and the professional responsibilities they have...and so I think it is a distinct profession.* (James, first interview)

*[in the profession] Gain confidence, be strong and believe in ourselves that, it’s such a valuable thing that we offer... don’t be ashamed and don’t believe in those stereotypes – it can be whatever we make it, and it’s a profession with so many possibilities of the sort of variations it could be in. I don’t see that as a weakness. Some people I’ve heard see that as a dilution, but I don’t; I think it’s a fantastic chance to expand the possibilities and open our minds to what it could really be...* (Claire, final interview)

Some participants raised a desire to see a stronger professional identity at the national level, where social work is advocated for and valued in the wider community, particularly in challenging dominant discourses and misperceptions of the profession.
Participants stated that the profession needs social workers in strategic locations, where they can have a positive influence at the micro, meso and macro levels:

*I think social work [is] very important and the stronger social work identity we have, I think, the better the chances there are of actually planting that into society more strongly, because if we have a stronger collective social work identity, we’re going to have a more powerful voice, on that larger, I guess on that political [level]…* (Isabella, second interview)

Belinda and Damon also gave some advice for the profession and the AASW about systemic support, to ease newly qualified social workers into practice and facilitate connectedness:

*…there could have been some sort of mentoring program or the opportunity, like with the…because not everyone might not want to participate in it, but like, also…Yeah, like where, even if it’s once a month or once every two months or something or a group, organising groups in certain areas.* (Belinda, second interview)

*…If they had a nation-wide sort of basic names for a lot of the job searches, it would help a lot. Because I would have never – if I would have seen something that said youth care coordinator, I would never have looked into it. I mean coordinator, that sounds like you – but it does not sound like what I thought it was.* (Damon, second interview)

Participants advised individuals and the profession to confidently articulate their social work identities, as well as be proactive about support and development needs, which will complement calls for social work to be leaders in the sector to maintain professional recognition (Healy & Meagher, 2004) and express a common professional identity (Asquith et al., 2005).

**Discussion**

The participants’ experiences of the interview process are powerful to me as the researcher. The participants demonstrated a proactive attitude towards verbalising and processing their experiences of professional identity. To witness this was a great privilege and our co-construction relationship reflected how hermeneutic phenomenological research is not a neutral or objective process, but an embodied and
subjective experience for both the researcher and participants. By being active contributors in the interviews, we all gained from the process. The participants reinforced how they were in an important phase of their career, where transition and adjustment, and growth and development were unfolding, and because of this, they were not passive subjects from whom I sought information. They were active in wanting to mutually give and take within the co-construction relationship across the year. The participants’ feedback encourages further consideration on critically reflective processes that are of benefit to newly qualified social workers.

The participants’ experiences of study participation also consolidated the centrality of professional identity within the newly qualified period. They were keen to reflect on their journey and professional identity as well as contribute their stories for the benefit of others, including me. Their participation revealed that they saw the research process as a mutually beneficial experience, which could help them on their journey of change and growth. Their experiences complement findings from Kearns and McArdle (2011), where their participants also appreciated the chance to reflect on professional identity rather than just knowledge and skill.

The participants’ reflections on time and space are another reminder of how social workers operate with limited resources and have few opportunities to pause and reflect on their work because, as Catherine (second interview) highlighted, they “hit the ground running”. The participants’ experiences also coincide with the postulations of the broader literature regarding challenges for new social workers to have time and space for reflection (Agllias, 2010), especially in busy or noisy organisations, where Stanley and Lincoln (2016) state: “Noise serves to keep a focus on the urgency of action and potentially closes our reflective practice” (p. 202). The participants’ experiences of study participation strengthen the message about systemic support, such as workload needs, and make reflection on professional identity more explicit within those structures.

These experiences of the research are further amplified in the advice the participants would give to key stakeholders. Their advice prompts others to understand the context and changing needs of newly qualified social workers, but to also be responsive to their individual nuances as advocated by others (Galpin et al., 2012; Jack & Donnellan, 2010). Their advice is a catalyst for identifying areas for further research and dialogue, which includes the importance of articulating a social work
identity, both individually and collectively. Participants reinforced that social work does not exist in a vacuum but is influenced by the perceptions of others and the profession itself. There is room for dominant discourses and perceptions to be resisted or changed in order to place greater value on social work. The participants’ views echo McMichael’s (2000) conclusion about social work confidently articulating a professional identity. An important message from the participants in my study is that professional identity is experienced in multidimensional ways, so actions to improve how social work is perceived, valued and expressed must also be multidimensional.

Finally, the participants’ advice consolidates what the first 12 months post-qualification period can be like, and how students and emerging graduates need to be mindful that a whole new journey of learning will unfold, and it is important that they remind themselves that they are newly qualified and to savour the journey. One must be ready and able to identify and pursue their needs and make the most of their experiences. In particular, the participants emphasised Oliver’s (2013) focus on the importance of social contexts in identity construction as a range of supportive relationships and networks are a significant contributor to their journey.

**Chapter Summary**

It was important for the participants, as active learners, to be able to have relevant time and space to critically reflect on their journey and professional identity. Doing so contributed to the process of transition and adjustment, and growth and development. However, this process did not simply unfold in isolation; they advised other key stakeholders to provide conscious effort and systemic support throughout the first 12 months post-qualification period.
Chapter 13
Conclusion

Having shared the experiences of the participants, I will now conclude the thesis by addressing the research questions and identifying future opportunities to build on my research. I will first summarise the main findings across each interview phase, including how this fits within the wider knowledge base about newly qualified social workers. In keeping with the theoretical framework, I will revisit foregrounding by identifying how my pre-understandings on the topic were transformed by undertaking the research.

Second, the credibility and limitations of the study will be outlined to contextualise and account for how the research was undertaken. Finally, based on the findings and context of the study, I describe pathways for further research and dialogue with key stakeholders. The final component establishes directions for uncovering rich and diverse knowledge as part of phenomenological and critical work.

Summary of Main Findings

My study had two research questions:

How is professional social work identity experienced during the first 12 months post-qualification?

How are the professional identities of newly qualified social workers fostered and/or eroded during the period of their first 12 months post-qualification?

I will revisit these questions by summarising the main findings of the study from each of the three interviews conducted throughout the 12-month period. To do this, I will draw on the five most prevalent thematic codes (Table 28) to emphasise commonalities within each interview phase.
During analysis, I used a reporting function in NVIVO to identify the five most prevalent thematic codes within each interview phase. I reviewed the codes to draw out patterns across the participants’ lived experience and to ensure the themes were consistent. Overall, there were eight thematic codes:

- Demographics and Background
- Transition and Adjustment
- Lived Experience of Social Work Identity
- Growth and Development (micro)
- Connectedness (meso)
- Environmental influences (macro)
- Experiences of Study Participation
- Advice

Three of these eight thematic codes were the most prevalent across all interviews – lived experience of social work identity; transition and adjustment; and growth and development. There were only slight changes in the order of prevalence across the interviews.
Main findings in the first interview phase. In the first interview phase, it was important for the participants to reflect on what it means to be a social worker as they were starkly aware of disconnecting from university and transitioning into practice and their professional identity. They were motivated to reflect on their journey and professional identity including with me. This was an aspect of their journey that transformed my pre-understandings on the topic of newly qualified social workers. From the beginning of the post-qualification period, many of the participants were already thinking about their professional identity, and how it will grow or change over the course of the year. The participants were eager to develop their professional identity and actively sought support for this endeavour, which included being involved in the study. This raises questions about why they were eager and passionate about their professional identities, and so soon. Did their educators play a role? Was it because most of the participants were employed in generic job roles and were concerned about what this might mean? Is it because they were living in rural and regional areas and, therefore, thought they might need to be proactive about maintaining their professional identity because there might not be sufficient support? A combination of these factors influenced their experiences, which also included my own presence of offering them the opportunity to be involved in the study. What it does indicate is that professional identity can be quite important to some newly qualified social workers, and it is worthwhile identifying ways to support their passion and journey.

When the newly qualified social workers’ 12-month period began, the participants’ professional identities were grounded in a strong foundation that they had gained from prior study, which also included field placement. The participants emphasised that the two extensive field placements provided strength to their education in Australia and impacted on their preparedness for practice and the development of their professional identity, which is consistent with some findings elsewhere (Smith et al., 2014). Experiences at university had great meaning to the participants, and considering the jolt some experienced when formal study ended, it would be worthwhile for educators to consider how graduating students are prepared for the end of university life, and what the initial transition can be like. It is acknowledged in the wider literature (for example, Galpin et al., 2012) that the initial transition can be turbulent, but perhaps further attention is needed during the final stages of university study to prepare students for the feelings and changes they may encounter.
As they entered the field, the participants broadly agreed that they were novice social workers who had to gain experience and develop further knowledge, skill and professional identity over time. They did not emerge from university as blank canvases who then had to “acquire” a professional identity or knowledge and skills; they emerged with an initial professional identity, which changed during the year. The participants had to explore and critically reflect on this professional identity, especially their social work mindset. They examined who they were both personally and professionally, including what made them distinct, and how to translate their sense of being a social worker into practice. This reflection on their professional identity led to discussing how to live up to their ideals of social work. As part of this journey, many participants talked about the importance of learning from others and being supported by the wider environment to articulate and validate what it means to be a social worker.

Participants who gained new jobs talked about transitioning and adjusting to practice. They described how this was an important time of change as they moved into practice and adjusted to their organisation and role. Those with years of prior experience, and who were staying in their current job, were also motivated to review their role and what it now meant to be a qualified social worker. As part of their journey, many participants described a range of emotions at that point, including excitement but also nervousness. Most described being ready to transition, move into their role, and gain further experience. However, a few participants experienced mixed emotions as they were not sure about how to transition and found the move from student to practitioner a bumpy ride.

The participants also talked about being aware of how social workers are perceived, including from other professions, clients and the wider community. They were conscious of mediating perceptions and were keen to express what social work is to foster their professional identity, which complemented their description of what it means to be a social worker. Participants were then keen to gain further experience and grow as a social worker. They saw themselves as lifelong learners and did not want their education and prior field experiences to stagnate. Consequently, there was a sense of hope, passion and enthusiasm expressed in many of the participants’ stories and experiences as they reflected on the present and looked to the future.
The participants’ early experiences indicated there was a need for internal and external reference points to social work. The participants entered into a state of flux when they were disconnecting from the social work environment at university and moving into the field, ready to enact their professional identity. Claiming a professional identity was important to the participants, and they needed to internally explore personal and professional aspects of themselves. They also needed to connect to external references points that confirmed and fostered their professional identity such as a job, thorough orientation/induction, supportive networks, the Australian social work code of ethics, and opportunities to critically reflect on their journey – for example, through participation in this research study. The matters raised by the participants in their first interviews indicate a need for the creation of an environment where newly qualified social workers can transition into a nurturing field that has consolidated systems of support that are dynamic and action based. Their experiences raise questions about what might happen if there is insufficient focus on professional identity and support.

**Main findings in the second interview phase.** The participants talked frequently about achieving growth and development, especially in terms of understanding and balancing their role, organisation and professional identity. As part of their transition and adjustment, many of the participants, no matter their background, considered themselves as beginners who had many lessons to learn, including how to clarify their roles with clients and colleagues. Many of the participants described being in the depths of learning every day as experiential learners, like they were during their field placements; as their experiences unfolded, they were able to critically reflect and develop further confidence in their social work identity. It was a continuous process that for some was also exhausting and needed to be balanced with time for reflection and self-care.

A mixture of personal and professional relationships provided space for participants to actively learn and be supported by others, which fostered their professional identities. It was necessary for the participants to have sufficient quality relationships, and to meet their needs, a mix of formal and informal relationships assisted them.

Managers, in particular, were discussed frequently because they had significant influence in terms of providing support and developing the culture of an organisation. The participants expressed that good managers engaged in behaviours that showed
trust, respect, leadership, competence and support. While there were a few cases of workplace bullying, largely against four young females, most of the participants enjoyed a positive working relationship with their manager, who played an important role in valuing their professional identity. These abilities and behaviours were also relevant in their supervision relationships, whether it was with a manager or external supervisor. The participants needed to engage with someone who was experienced and skilful, and could understand their needs as a newly qualified social worker. As their professional identity evolved over time, it was important for the participants to have sufficient time with their managers and supervisors to consider their changing needs in the short and long term.

Without consistent support and external reference points to social work that validate professional identity, it is important to, again, ask is there a risk newly qualified social workers will be unable to sustain a commitment to social work, or become too focused on a generic role identity. This did occur for two participants, who experienced the first six months as largely negative without support such as meaningful relationships and opportunities to critically reflect. Others saw the potential for risks and advocated for a greater focus on professional identity in social work. To enhance their relationships, especially with managers and supervisors, the participants emphasised that they needed deeper critical reflection on professional identity and career development, similar to the focus and kinds of questions covered in this research study’s interviews.

A collective identity based on shared dimensions of membership, language and mindset was particularly important for development, and it also contributed to clarifying a distinct social work identity as part of transition and adjustment to professional identity. These experiences are another example of how my pre-understandings have been changed. While supportive relationships have been emphasised in the wider literature and through my own newly qualified journey, the emphasis on experiencing a collective identity with social workers through shared dimensions stands out in these findings and highlights to me the importance of connectedness with other social workers as part of fostering professional identity. Questions can be raised about the visibility of professional identity within these various relationships, especially supervision, as most participants did not have opportunities to explicitly reflect on the phenomenon.
It would be worth exploring experiences and needs of supervision in greater detail as some participants talked about the importance of having a mix of relationships and quality being more important than frequency. However, it could be hard to know what is being missed out on when it has not been experienced. Further exploration in this area is especially pertinent as most of the participants lived and worked in rural and regional contexts, where it was not always possible to gain consistent and reliable access to formal relationships like supervision, even though most of the participants said they were satisfied, unlike the rural and regional participants in a different Australian study (Healy et al., 2015). Two participants living in capital cities also experienced difficulties, which suggests that geographical location is not an indicator of access to sufficient meaningful relationships. Research with a larger representative sample of social workers from rural and urban locations would be necessary to explore these dimensions in greater detail.

Overall, by the time of the second interview, most of the participants had developed a sense of achievement because they had gained greater clarity about their role and had settled into their social work identity. Many of the hopes they talked about in the first interview were coming to fruition through individual effort and social support. This is notable as most of the participants were located in rural and regional contexts, where it can be challenging and isolating (Healy et al., 2015) to practise as a social worker (Green, 2003; Krieg Mayer, 2001). Rural practice is considered difficult (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015), and yet generally, the rural and regional participants in my study had good relationships and support, which expands the knowledge base on rural practice. While access to formal support structures varied for participants in my study, there was a mix of support and opportunities for growth and development, which contributed to the participants making progress in developing their professional identities. In order to build on their progress, the participants emphasised that they needed more time, experience and opportunities to critically reflect.

**Main findings in the final interview phase.** Most of the participants had transitioned and adjusted to their roles, professional identity and new life as a qualified social worker. The level of support the participants received in the field emerged as a vital ingredient in fostering their professional identity. Through sufficient support, many were able to reflect throughout the whole year, and develop their own personal style as they gained greater clarity and confidence regarding their role and professional identity. The participants looked back on having to make
adjustments over time as they moved from university, transitioned into practice, and then further developed their professional identity, in terms of being, knowing and doing. Most had gained a better sense of who they are as a social worker, the knowledge they draw on and how to practice effectively in line with their professional values. What stood out was a sense that the participants had changed and adjusted over the whole 12 months, no matter their background or location, and were aware that they would continue to grow beyond this initial newly qualified period.

Participants, again, described a strong commitment to their individual growth and development, and most were able to express and promote their social work identity. In order to foster their professional identity, the participants were active learners throughout the whole year. Their experiences complement Jack and Donnellan’s (2010) view that new social workers should be seen as developing professionals. The participants embraced lessons and undertook individual actions to express their professional identity, which helped to foster it.

Most participants, who largely lived in rural and regional settings, had a positive year, which was characterised as one that involved a lot of learning and change that must be embraced individually, as well as being facilitated within wider networks and structures, especially nurturing environments. The importance of individual strengths and social supports were raised as part of this as participants talked about how they drew on their own strengths to be proactive learners, especially when faced with challenges. Many found they had grown both personally and professionally over the course of the year. However, the journey was not purely individual; environmental influences were consistently discussed in all the interviews where the participants emphasised how they constructed and fostered/eroded their professional identities in relationship to others and institutions, which were informed by dominant discourses and perceptions.

In the face of various dominant discourses such as neo-conservatism, managerialism, positivist science and gender, claiming a professional identity based on social work values and ethics was important to these participants. The participants emphasised a range of support and development needs that could inform policies and systems to assist newly qualified social workers to be retained in their jobs and foster their professional identities. Working in a nurturing environment across the whole year had
been important, and it was based on discourses and structures that valued, understood and met participants’ needs. These systemic strategies included:

- Thorough orientation/induction
- Constructive feedback, including encouragement to enact, explore and critically reflect on professional identity
- Ongoing formal and informal support that met changing transition and development needs
- Access to consistent and reliable supervision, which balanced administrative and reflective needs
- Access to professional development, including training and education, which balanced organisational needs with individual career development
- Structures and support for professional self-care in the workplace
- Recognition of workload needs such as being introduced to complex tasks over time and having quarantined time for reflection.

By the final interview, many of the participants were able to look back on their journey and reflect on what they had achieved. This informed the advice they had given to stakeholders. The participants advised others to learn from their journeys and to pay attention to the lived experience of professional identity during the first 12 months post-qualification period, not just to their knowledge and skills. Kearns and McArdle (2011) also emphasise this point in their study on positive identity development. While there were highs and lows throughout the year, most of the participants had gained from the many challenges they faced and were able to achieve their goals, including articulating what it means to be a social worker. By the end of interviewing, most participants were looking to the future with renewed passion and enthusiasm for a new chapter in their life’s story.

**Discussion**

The lived experience of professional identity for the participants unfolded over key periods throughout the first 12 months post-qualification period. Their professional identities changed over time, and the entire first year was considered a foundational period for their growth, as part of retention in the profession. This timeframe was similar to the transition and development studies found in the literature, including Nicholson’s (1990) work-role transition model used in UK sources (for example,
Fenge, 2013; Galpin et al., 2012), which focused on *preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilisation*. The participants in my study were largely prepared for practice, and were grateful for the foundation their generic social work degree established, including field placement and specific subjects, such as psychology, which assisted them in their current roles. However, some participants, especially those who studied off-campus, were less prepared for the end of university study itself. When they *encountered* the field, there was a range of learning experiences they resolved as part of their *adjustment* to organisations and their professional identity. Their regular engagement in learning activities reflects similar findings about field placement during university study (Bogo, 2015; Cleak et al., 2016b; Smith et al., 2014). After six months, the participants had gained further confidence and had become more settled in their organisations and professional identities. With more time, experience and critical reflection, most participants were able to achieve *stabilisation* and continued on a positive trajectory, where they could foster their professional and role identity and develop their personal style. However, these experiences were not always linear or homogenous as there were individual nuances and variations in how participants progressed, such as prior experience in the field, the complexity of their organisation, and how long they had been employed. Some transitioned and adjusted more quickly, whereas others needed a longer time to settle. Therefore, it can be useful to have a broad understanding of key periods during the first 12 months post-qualification, but this should be balanced with an understanding of the individual as advocated in other studies (Galpin et al., 2012; Jack & Donnellan, 2010).

The participants experienced their professional identity as evolving and changing entities that they had to consciously develop. A unique contribution of this study to the wider literature is the in-depth qualitative focus on professional identity through multiple interviews, and inviting participants to bring artefacts to their final interview. While studies in the wider literature, especially in the UK, mention the importance of professional identity (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Fenge, 2013; Galpin et al., 2012), these sources had not thoroughly explored the phenomenon. In their study involving participants from England, Sweden and Italy, Campanini et al. (2012) found that the participants consolidated their studies into their professional identities over time.
My findings are consistent with those, but identify three particular dimensions of transition and adjustment to professional identity:

- Consolidating professional identity
- Clarifying a distinct professional identity
- Settling into professional identity

These dimensions of transition and adjustment to professional identity add unique knowledge and depth to the transition and development models and literature in social work. These dimensions could inform students’ preparation for practice and be a point of recognition and reflection for newly qualified social workers. It would be worthwhile further exploring these dimensions with larger representative samples of newly qualified social workers to expand the knowledge base.

Based on the findings, it is difficult to determine where the participants sat on the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model of knowledge and skill acquisition, which is commonly utilised in social work literature (Donnellan & Jack, 2015; Fook et al., 2000; Galpin et al., 2012; Moriarty et al., 2011). There are some consistencies with other studies in the literature as the participants talked about growth and development of knowledge, skill and professional identity over time, especially as they learnt to embrace uncertainty and discomfort in practice. Gaining experience gave them further confidence to exercise their professional judgement during the 12-month period, which then fostered their professional identities. However, individual variation did exist, with some indicating they had more confidence and ability than others.

Fook et al. (2000) question whether the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model articulates the acquisition of expertise or just experience; I would argue both are relevant. Participants in my study emphasised the importance of experiential learning as part of developing their expertise, especially in relation to articulating what it means to be a social worker. To them, the first year was like an extended field placement, where a great deal of experiential learning occurred all over again and contributed towards the development of their expertise. So, is the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model still relevant to social work? The findings here suggest social work needs to establish a clearer evidence base about the usefulness and applicability of the model. To ensure the model is useful, further research is needed to gather a more solid understanding of what level graduates should be at when they emerge from study, which could then inform the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (2012).
Moreover, the model needs updating to incorporate a holistic perspective of professional identity based on the shared dimensions of *being, knowing/thinking* and *doing*; it is limiting to only examine knowledge and skill, which the wider literature also does quite frequently (Kearns & McArdle, 2011).

It is also not convincing that newly qualified social workers should be conceptualised as apprentices, which Galpin et al., (2012) suggest in their textbook. Participants described their university course as being a major contributor to their preparation for practice, and that they were capable of actively and independently learning because of the expectations of their job roles. There was a need for support and guidance, but not constant and significant oversight as would be applicable for an apprenticeship. A more appropriate metaphor for newly qualified social workers and their lived experience of professional identity is provided by Newberry (2014):

> An alternative metaphor for first-year social workers could be new travellers on a long journey. New travellers do not hit the ground running, but they do come prepared with a map and a compass—the map representing knowledge about the nature of social problems, social welfare, and social work interventions; and the compass representing a strong sense of social work ethics and values. Each new social worker walks a slightly different path, but all rely on the wisdom of social workers who have come before to make decisions on the journey, particularly when there are challenging conditions or obstacles in the way; experienced social workers are guides to new social workers. (p. 52)

Being a traveller resonates well with participants in my study as they emerged from education with a foundation and mixture of formal study, previous employment, and life experience. They also emerged with a sense of social work identity (compass). Most of them recognised that they did not enter their new lives as completed practitioners simply to be competent, rational technicians. Their professional identity was underpinned by a commitment to being critically reflective professionals – a “work-in-progress” – as they travelled and developed over time and were supported along the journey. In short, their lived experience and development of professional identity was dynamic, dialogic and non-linear.

The findings reveal that over the year the participants were consistently mindful of wider environmental influences, especially dominant discourses and perceptions, that impact on social work and could de-value professional identity. In response to these contexts, it was important for the participants to claim and assume a professional
identity because it gave them a framework from which to see the world, undertake interventions, and critically reflect on their roles and relationships.

External points of reference such as university study, the code of ethics and systems of support and development were anchors to social work that fostered professional identity. With a commitment to professional identity, most of the participants mediated these discourses within their immediate environments, including with other social workers, but the limits to their personal agency must also be acknowledged. For example, the participants were committed to multidimensional practice, which resonates with the findings in Segal-Engelchin and Kaufman (2008). They embraced micro and macro orientations to practice, but job-role limitations narrowed most of their work to the micro level, which for some constrained their professional identity. While most participants took active steps to express their professional identities and commitment to multidimensional practice, they said that their professional identities needed to be valued in the wider social environment.

With increasing competition between professions, and trends towards multidisciplinary practice and diverse generic job titles, it would be worthwhile to further investigate collective ways of supporting professional identity that address the micro, meso and macro dimensions identified in this study. The profession could examine all layers in order to encourage newly qualified social workers to take individual, collective and social action by being supported in the social/professional environment.

Fostering professional identity required the participants to take responsibility for their learning, but they could not grow on their own. A range of relationships and environmental factors had a role to play in their development and retention in the profession. It was crucial for the participants to be nurtured within a mix of relationships, be valued as social workers, and have autonomy and access to opportunities for growth, development and self-care. Without these arrangements, erosion of professional identity was inevitable.

The participants’ support and development needs indicate that it was important to balance core aspects of university study with post-qualification learning. As Hay et al. (2012) point out, all key stakeholders should be involved in supporting the transition and success of newly qualified social workers. In my study, the participants reinforced that university had a responsibility to ensure they could successfully enter
the field, but employers and wider professional systems equally had a responsibility to recognise their needs as newly qualified social workers and invest in their growth, development and retention. While most participants were satisfied with relational and environmental support, it was not always consistent, and there were no guarantees that those relationships and structures would be there in the first place, no matter where they lived.

At the meso level, when participants left university study and entered the field, their experiences were dependent on whether organisations, especially managers, would acknowledge, value and support their needs. Fortunately most participants had most of their needs met, but for several participants who described a negative or mixed year, their experience was starkly different. Two participants, both of whom were young women, lived in capital cities and experienced significant erosion of their professional identity because of little connectedness, support and value for their professional identity. They also had to deal with workplace bullying.

Such incidents raise questions about the differences between urban and regional experiences. Most of the participants lived in rural and regional settings and described having a positive year, whereas those who lived in capital cities had either a poor or mixed year. Does this indicate that rural and regional social workers are experiencing better support and opportunities to develop and enact their professional identities, than had been previously identified in the literature? Is it possible these contexts produce unrecognised benefits, such as having to be autonomous and creative, which facilitate the development of a visible professional identity for rural practitioners? It would be worthwhile exploring these questions through further research and identify particular strengths of rural social work that could possibly be applied to the wider profession, which is highly urbanised in Australia. Perhaps with an increased focus on location and consolidated systems of support, social work could foster and validate diverse nurturing environments and contribute to better retention strategies for newly qualified social workers.

Finally, the findings prompt questions about how professional identity is acknowledged and sustained in Australian social work, where there is no statutory registration or protection of title. New graduates might emerge from university with developing social work identities, but can this be sustained without a more conscious and deliberate system of support? Should Australia follow the example set by
England and establish a national *Assessed and Supported Year in Employment*? There are contextual differences between England and Australia, but the findings in my study support other calls for further research into, and dialogue about, support and retention strategies such as those used in England (Cheron-Sauer, 2012; Healy et al., 2015). Indeed, while the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* prioritise professional identity as a graduate attribute (AASW, 2012), there is no explicit mention of social work identity in documents for practitioners such as in the *Australian Supervision Standards* (AASW, 2014) and *Australian Practice Standards* (AASW, 2013). This is a gap in the Australian professional discourse and systems that could be changed to draw explicit attention to professional identity and the needs of newly qualified social workers.

Progress has been made with the *Australian Supervision Standards*, which recommends new graduates engage in more frequent supervision (AASW, 2014). These standards could be enhanced with the creation of a national framework for graduate support based on principles and strategies for valuing the professional identities of newly qualified social workers, thereby affording appropriate levels of autonomy and ensuring appropriate access to professional development and professional self-care. The findings of my study encourage a broader focus on systemic strategies for graduate support, which is also based on clearer data in relation to rates of retention. The quality of retention data has been called into question (Cheron-Sauer, 2012), and it is important to develop a better picture of how many graduates are lost to the social work profession, and when, so that informed strategies can be devised and implemented.

Overall, the descriptions of lived experience gathered from the interviews of the participants in my study add weight to growing calls for a greater focus on the initial transition from study to practice (Clapton, 2013); the newly qualified period and retention strategies (Cheron-Sauer, 2012); and how professional identities develop (Harrison & Healy, 2015; Healy et al., 2015). The development and sustainability of professional identity should not be an activity that is solely the responsibility of individuals and their immediate colleagues. A systemic approach is needed, where all key stakeholders are actively involved (Cheron-Sauer, 2012) in nurturing, valuing and retaining newly qualified social workers. These findings encourage stakeholders to investigate the needs of Australian practitioners, with consideration given to commonalities and individual nuance in growth and development.
Study Credibility and Limitations

In a qualitative study such as this, the notion of credibility is relevant for assessing the strengths and limitations of my research design and findings. The fundamental question is: has the researcher been transparent, persuasive, ethical and believable (Angen, 2000; Vandermause, 2012) in terms of how the study has been developed, executed and written up? The research questions and design must be rational, logical, ethical and theoretically consistent (Angen, 2000). The findings must be well articulated and placed within the wider literature in order to draw out further areas for exploration (Todres & Holloway, 2010). These dimensions were realised in my study by developing the research questions in response to a critical examination of the literature, articulating and applying the ontological, epistemological and methodological components of the theoretical framework, and discussing how the findings were consistent and/or diverse with regard to the literature on newly qualified social workers. I have explicitly outlined the influences on the design of this research study and the utilisation of field notes as part of accounting for my use of “self”, especially during the interviewing process. A strength of this study is that participants were interviewed three times over the year which elicited rich experiential knowledge. The unique design of the study facilitated an in-depth engagement with participants to critically reflect on their professional identities over time. Participants confirmed this when discussing their motivations to participate in the study and the impacts they experienced during their involvement. There were opportunities to examine how their professional identity changed over time and to trace its fluidity as they looked back on experiences and re-examined themselves with new insight, knowledge and experience.

The theoretical framework of this study maintains that knowledge is co-constructed and unfolds within the socio-cultural contexts of those exploring lived experience, which in this case was between the researcher and participants. This means I do not claim to uncover an absolute or universal truth because as Angen (2000) states: “life as we live it is not static enough…it is much more fluid, contextual, and relational” (p. 380). A crucial question is whether the rich lived experiences of those portrayed have been captured and represented clearly and ethically. This places emphasis on two components. First, the relationship between the participants and the researcher is vital in order to ensure ongoing dialogue occurred, and the participants in my study were able to check the accuracy of how I interpreted their experiences. This was a
strength of my study as participants were given multiple opportunities to review transcripts, comment on my initial notes and the whole summary of their journey, as well as affirm generated themes. I also utilised supervision regularly and analysed the rich descriptions of lived experience in multiple ways by checking which codes were the most prevalent in NVIVO. By doing so, the stories I collected were thoroughly analysed and reflected upon in order to ensure that themes were generated from the ground up and depicted the participants’ stories as accurately as possible within the context of the theoretical framework.

The second dimension to ensuring the participants’ stories were clearly and ethically presented relates to how the researcher conveys their stories to the reader. It is important that clear details and examples of lived experience are given to express the themes well (Todres & Holloway, 2010). I have attempted to demonstrate this through the use of rich quotes from participants, case examples, metaphors, participants’ artefacts, and participants’ narratives of their journeys (see Appendix E). All components reflect multiple ways of communicating the findings so they are accessible to the reader.

Despite the possible strengths of those actions, there are a number of limitations that need to be considered when reading and understanding the findings. One major area relates to the characteristics of the participants. Within the group, selection bias could have unintentionally occurred, because the participants were likely to have been highly motivated to be involved in the study so as they could critically reflect on their professional identity. It should be acknowledged that others, who may have been less interested in professional identity, were not motivated to participate, and so their experiences are not captured in this study. Also, participants volunteered to be involved in the study, which means I could not guarantee that the cohort was as diverse as it could have been, which is generally preferred in phenomenological research. The participants were predominantly white Australian and female, which largely reflects the profile of Australian social work. It would have been beneficial to have included participants from a range of backgrounds, such as Indigenous social workers and social workers from overseas who are practising in Australia.

In terms of employment characteristics, the study could have had some further depth if there had been participants from statutory child protection services. They are a major employer of social workers, and many of the studies in the literature review
included participants from this field. Today, there remain ongoing concerns about initial induction and support (McPherson & Barnett, 2006) and rates of staff retention in the child protection sector (Healy et al., 2009). It would be useful to incorporate their experiences into the knowledge base.

The cohort of participants was only from the undergraduate level of study and recruited from one university. Experiences of graduates from other institutions, and possible unique dimensions to being in the Master’s qualifying degree have not been included. All students in the postgraduate social work program have a prior degree, and most have a prior professional identity – for example, teaching, nursing, or psychology. There could be unique features or challenges to their lived experience of professional identity. While some of my participants also had prior degrees and professional identities, it would be worthwhile including postgraduate students, as well as graduates from other universities, to add depth to the understanding of how professional identities evolve and are renegotiated in social work.

Another limitation that needs consideration is my own context, including my experiences, and membership of a dominant white culture that makes up social work. I have developed within a largely Western form of social work, and so this has influenced as well as limited what has been explored in this study. For example, the literature review was based on English language sources. It is likely there is a wider range of literature in multiple languages and cultures that have not been included in this study. Also, my own context inevitably means that different interpretations could have unfolded if another researcher had undertaken the work. For example, I come from a rural and regional background, as did most of the participants, which contrasts with many of the other social workers in the field who operate in a metropolitan setting. My perspectives could be quite different because of my background. There are also similarities between my experiences as a newly qualified social worker and those of the participants. Is it possible my experiences and examination of the literature influenced the analysis process? It is possible, but I have attempted to mediate this by inviting ongoing feedback from participants, engaging in foregrounding, and consciously acknowledging how my pre-understandings changed by doing the research. In doing this, my influence does not necessarily detract from phenomenological and critical research, because multiple interpretations add depth to the knowledge base. What is important is whether I have remained grounded in the lived experience of participants as much as possible and been tentative in my claims
and open to the contextual and ever-evolving nature of knowledge on the phenomenon of professional identity.

In relation to the theoretical framework, Mattsson (2014) raises an important criticism for consideration in my own study. She argues critical reflection raises awareness of wider social forces that can be oppressive, but tends to be too general, and overlooks particular social categories such as gender, race, etc. This is a possibility in my own findings, where experiences of gender, race, socio-economic status and disability were not thoroughly explored or written about as central categories of lived experience. Considering young female participants were more likely to experience bullying and a negative post-qualification year, further analysis of these dimensions is warranted. While they were raised, those dimensions have not been explored in significant detail, which may have compromised the depth and richness of the findings. It would be worthwhile, therefore, for future research to focus more closely on those social categories in order to maintain a holistic perspective.

In relation to the research methods and procedure, the transcription process can dilute meaning because not all the dimensions of communication, especially non-verbal components, are always captured. I attempted to counteract this occurring through my field notes, where I recorded non-verbal communication where possible, but dimensions could have been lost, which would have impacted on how I and participants reviewed and understood the transcripts.

Further to this, the handling of sensitive information is another way in which lived experience might not be fully represented in the findings. Ethical dimensions are an important part of qualitative work (Cousins, 2002) and sensitive information regarding these dimensions in the findings may not have always been included. Because of this point, it could be argued that the findings of this study do not take into account and fully reflect the experiences of the participants. For example, one participant with a disability raised how to share their story whilst maintaining confidentiality because we were aware they could be identifiable. We discussed how to find a balance to ensure their experience of discrimination would not become invisible. We mutually agreed that when experiences related to their disability were presented, the pseudonym of the person would be withheld entirely. Within their individual story and vignette, there is no explicit mention of their disability but the essence of their experiences was captured. Finally, when other participants raised
sensitive, “off the record” comments, I noted them in my field notes, which were then securely stored, in order to maintain a holistic understanding of their journey, but I did not include them explicitly in the findings. Consequently, some rich descriptions and aspects of experience have not been included in the study, but on balance, ethical dimensions outweighed these considerations.

Taylor (2006) also picks up on the limitations of text by looking at how it is not always a transparent medium for accessing realities. She argues that communication occurs in particular ways, depending on the context and purpose of the situation, which means communication can have performative elements. Taylor (2006) found examples of performative communication when looking at the written work of students. She traced how they tailored their responses for various reasons, which could have been conscious or unconscious. This could be applicable to my own study in that participants may have consciously or unconsciously tailored their responses to the interview questions for various reasons, including perceptions about prior academic relationships with me as a lecturer. One example I could cite was when a participant stated to me: “What do you want me to say?” This question suggested that their response would be tailored to what I wanted or to my perspective, which would have taken the focus away from their own lived experience. This situation, and others, could reflect power imbalances, especially as I am a former lecturer to the participants. Some participants may have held back in their criticisms of the CSU curriculum if they were worried about how such information would be used. Or they may have curtailed their responses in view of having a former lecturer being part of their journey and talking about how they practise. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge possible limitations in what was shared.

I focused on building a trusting relationship with participants, but I did not assume that it would be possible to eliminate all power differentials in the dynamic between the participants and me. These limitations are a reminder that research unfolds within a contextual space influenced by time, culture and relationships. It is important to remember that knowledge needs to be continually scrutinised, reflected upon and redeveloped in the future.
Pathways for Further Research and Dialogue

The findings encourage employers/managers, supervisors, Australian social work educators, and the wider social work profession to further recognise the post-qualification period as an important time for transition and growth, especially in order to sustain social work through multi-level (micro, meso and macro) retention strategies. To this end, I detail below a range of ideas for further research and dialogue based on the findings of this study.

Due to the context of this study, limitations and findings, there are some general directions that could build on my project. First, it would be worthwhile for Australian academics to undertake further research on newly qualified social workers with larger representative samples to add depth to the knowledge base. Partnerships could be formed between universities, as well as with the AASW and other peak bodies, such as the Australian Heads of Council of Schools of Social Work, which consists of leading social work educators. Together, such partnerships within the profession could systematically collate data on retention and loss of social workers, in order to understand the extent of issues across Australia. The samples should include female and male social workers from diverse cultural backgrounds; age groups; employment settings; universities; geographical locations; and entry-level post-graduate social work degrees. Furthermore, considering child protection is a large employer of Australian social workers, and they were missing from this sample, it would be worth deliberately recruiting from those contexts.

Second, by undertaking research with larger representative samples particular areas of inquiry can be targeted for data collection, including: how newly qualified social workers express their professional identity in terms of being, knowing and doing and how they experience transition and adjustment to professional identity. This could include impacts of supervision, dimensions of gender and age and urban and rural experiences. Research in these areas could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of systemic needs and retention strategies, as well as prompting further dialogue about whether Australia should consider developing graduate support programs, such as the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment in England.

Third, it would be valuable to undertake longitudinal follow-up, for example, over three to five years, with one cohort to discover how their experiences continue to unfold after the initial post-qualification period. Such research could assist with
clarifying the meaning of terms such as “newly qualified social worker”, “new graduate” and “early-career social work” in the professional discourse. It could also track the long-term contribution of field placement to preparedness for practice. More importantly, we could investigate the ongoing development of professional identity, career trajectories and long-term retention strategies.

Pathways for further research and dialogue with the field. There are opportunities for various stakeholders – such as the AASW, the wider profession, policymakers, social work supervisors and employers/managers – to develop partnerships based on a shared responsibility for recognising and supporting newly qualified social workers. For social work supervisors and employers/managers, this includes finding ways to be leaders in the sector as called for by Healy and Meagher (2004). This could be achieved through encouraging graduates to embrace their professional identity, and providing ongoing support through: thorough orientation/induction processes; access to reflective supervision that explores professional identity, and a range of professional development activities; and opportunities to build connectedness with experienced colleagues, including mentoring. Support should be tailored to the individual and changing needs of newly qualified social workers. As such, there need to be opportunities for employees to express their needs and provide feedback to managers/employers.

At the wider professional level, the AASW and its members could explore ways to extend current professional standards, such as the AASW Practice Standards (AASW, 2013), to formally recognise systemic needs of newly qualified social workers in the areas of reduced workload, time for reflection, access to professional development, and structures for supporting professional self-care. This could include the development of a national framework for graduate support. The profession could also integrate references to social work identity more explicitly into those standards, as well as the AASW Supervision Standards (AASW, 2014), to complement and build on the AASW Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012).

Pathways for further research and dialogue with social work educators. The participants in this study came from one university, and so some of the findings may be contextual to CSU. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for other Australian social work educators, to consider the findings of this study and possible areas of inquiry that they could follow up and further investigate in partnership with each other and
professional bodies such as the Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work, and the AASW. In terms of curricula content, educators could reflect on their own discourses, especially around how social work is defined, to encourage students to be advocates for the profession. It would be worth identifying how explicit professional identity is covered across core social work subjects, and prompt students to articulate multidimensional ways to foster professional identity based on their strengths and resources, especially meaningful relationships. This could include reflecting on ways to navigate dominant discourses, organisational culture and manger styles.

Finally, preparation for practice is an important theme in the wider literature, and the participants in my study confirmed that a generic degree with subjects suited to their employment, and well supported field placement experiences is fundamental. To further enhance preparation educators are encouraged to integrate topics on early-career preparation and development, including transition into the field, managing the end of study, and how to undertake job-seeking. These topics could lay the foundations for a smooth transition into the field and professional identity as a qualified social worker.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the lived experience of professional identity with 17 newly qualified social workers in the first 12 months post-qualification period, all of whom graduated from one university in Australia. Most of the participants lived and worked in rural and regional settings. The study explored the multiple individual and social contexts that converged with their professional identities in order to consider how these newly qualified social workers prospered and remained committed to their profession. The wider literature focused on individual experiences and gave recognition to the social context, mostly at the organisational level. My study specifically incorporated and explored all dimensions as part of understanding lived experience in a holistic manner. The findings encourage social work to focus on the development of professional identity as an important feature of the initial post-qualification period and as a strategy for the sustainability of the profession. There is a need for systemic support that facilitates retention of newly qualified social workers so they can thrive as active learners during this time.
For participants, the first 12 months post-qualification period was an exciting, and at times for some, a tumultuous and even disheartening period. Most remained passionate about professional identity, and throughout the year were prompted to explore, reflect, refine and develop what it means to be a social worker. As part of this journey, there were significant learning experiences as they explored and settled into professional identity. Over time most participants became increasingly confident and fluid in their practice, and while there were common experiences within the group, each journey unfolded in nuanced and diverse ways. The participants faced the journey with strength, resources and a strong will to express their social work identity, especially in the face of dominant discourses and perceptions that did not always value social work. They had much to offer and needed nurturing environments that helped them to realise their potential, no matter where they lived or worked. After 12 months, they became well-seasoned travellers who had developed further experiential wisdom because of their passion for lifelong learning, even those who had negative experiences. Their professional identity was experienced as a fluid and ever-developing entity, which was fostered and/or eroded through individual, relational, organisational and wider environmental contexts.

The findings of this study encourage more formal recognition of the experiences, professional identities and needs of Australian newly qualified social workers so that the profession can retain and sustain committed practitioners who are dedicated to the goals of social work, no matter where they go in their journey.
References


Baginsky, M., & Manthorpe, J. (2016). The views and experiences of step up to social work graduates: Two and a half years following qualification. British
"If you could change one thing": Social service workers and restructuring. *Australian Social Work, 59*(1), 20–34.


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Appendices

Appendix A – Advertisement, Information Sheet, Consent Form and Draft Interview Schedule

Advertisement for recruitment.

Project Title – To Be or Not to Be: Professional Social Work Identity During the First Twelve Months Post-qualification

Bernadette Moorhead

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University

Are you about to complete your Bachelor of Social Work studies with CSU?

Would you like to share some of your experiences during the first twelve months post-qualification?

I am researching my thesis on first year practitioners’ experiences of constructing and maintaining a professional social work identity. I am interested in talking with CSU qualified social workers from a range of backgrounds and job environments. If you are at all curious, interested or want to ask general questions please contact me for a chat and/or an information sheet and consent form.

I can be reached via telephone or email, whatever suits you.

Phone: 02 6933 4513 Email: bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

NOTE: The School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical
conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Locked Bag 678

Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678

Tel: (02) 6933 2249

Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Dear

The aim of this research is to explore your professional social work identity and how it changes during the first twelve months post-qualification. This includes discussing power relations at individual and social levels that may influence you. The main research questions for this project are:

- What does it mean to be a social worker during the first year of professional practice, through the perspectives of newly qualified practitioners from Charles Sturt University (CSU)?
- How is professional social work identity fostered and/or eroded during this time?
- What is needed to support professional social work identity?
- Any other areas/issues you want to discuss

Your experiences will contribute to a better understanding of social work identity and how to develop and retain new graduates in the profession.

If you agree to participate, there will be three interviews over the course of your first twelve months post-qualification and a follow-up focus group. More specifically, this will involve:
### Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>How Long (approximations, depending on responses)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optional setting context form</td>
<td>Before the first interview</td>
<td>10–15min</td>
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<tr>
<td>First interview</td>
<td>Within three months of qualifying</td>
<td>1–1½ hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second interview</td>
<td>Six months after the first interview</td>
<td>1–1½ hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final interview</td>
<td>12 months after the first interview</td>
<td>1–1½ hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow-up focus group</td>
<td>After the completion of all participant interviews and the majority of data analysis</td>
<td>1–2 hours</td>
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</table>

With your permission the interviews and focus group will be audio recorded and a research assistant might take notes during the focus group. In this case, the research assistant will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Please note that your participation in this research is voluntary and you are able to withdraw without penalty at any time before completion of the project. Withdrawal of the information you provide will not be possible after the completion of the researcher’s PhD thesis or associated publications.

You can decline to answer any question during data collection. If at any time you become uncomfortable, the process will be stopped immediately and further avenues of support will be identified with you. The following services can be accessed:

- LIFELINE (24 hour telephone counselling service): 13 11 14
- GSAHS ACCESSLINE (24 hour crisis service): 1800 800 944
- SALVO CARE LINE: 1300 36 36 22

These details will be provided again, at the start of data collection.

You will also have the opportunity to review all transcripts and be involved in interpretation to ensure accuracy of analysis. To maintain confidentiality, your personal details will be de-identified before data analysis and storage stages of the research. All data will be stored in locked files or password protected. If the PhD supervisors of the chief investigator or any transcribers have access to the data at these stages it will be de-identified and confidentiality agreements will be signed.
Outcomes of the research will be published as part of a PhD thesis and may also be used for journal articles and conference presentations.

If you wish to participate in this research project, please complete the enclosed consent form and return it in the reply-paid envelope provided. You are welcome to contact the chief investigator to ask any questions or discuss the project further, without any obligation to participate as a result. Upon return of the consent form, you will be contacted to arrange an appropriate time and place of convenience to you for the first interview.

Please note that the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Chair:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Locked Bag 678
WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678
Ph: (02) 6933 2249
Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Thank you for considering participating in this research. If you have any questions at all please do not hesitate to contact the chief investigator.

Kind Regards,

Bernadette Moorhead BSW (Hons)
Consent form.

Charles Sturt University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Project Title – To Be or Not to Be: Professional Social Work Identity During the First Twelve Months Post-qualification

Chief Investigator: Bernadette Moorhead BSW (Hons)

(BH): 6933 4513  (E): bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

Principal Supervisor: Associate Professor Wendy Bowles

(BH): 6933 2695  (E): wbowles@csu.edu.au

The purpose of this research is to explore the professional social work identities of newly qualified practitioners over a twelve month period. First, there will be an optional form you can choose to complete. Three interviews will take place with each participant at the following points: 1) Point of qualification 2) 6 months after the first interview 3) 12 months after the first interview. A follow up focus group will occur after the completion of all participant interviews and the majority of data analysis. The completed form and interview/focus group transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and all audio files will be password protected, until such time as no longer needed (approximately 20 years). At this time all information will be shredded, destroyed and deleted. It is envisaged that this research will add to the knowledge base about the identity and needs of newly qualified social workers, within Australia in particular. If you wish to participate please read the participant statement and sign below.

Participant statement:

I am willing to participate in this research project. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and as such I am free to withdraw my participation until completion of the study, and if I do, I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment. The purpose of the research has been explained to me, including the potential discomfort associated with the research and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me. Also, I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers. I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this
research about me is confidential and that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be used or published without my written permission. I also give permission for the interviews and focus group to be audio recorded and handwritten notes where relevant.

The CSU School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Locked Bag 678

WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678

Ph: (02) 6933 2249

Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Please print name:

Signed:

Date:
Participant support.

Project title – To Be or Not to Be: Professional Social Work Identity During the First Twelve Months Post-qualification

Chief Investigator: Bernadette Moorhead

(BH): 6933 4513   (E): bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

Principal Supervisor: Associate Professor Wendy Bowles

(BH): 6933 2695   (E): wbowles@csu.edu.au

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please note you can decline to answer any question during data collection. If at any time you become uncomfortable, the process will be stopped immediately. If you require further aid the chief investigator will support you to access relevant support, including local services if necessary. The following services can be accessed:

- LIFELINE (24 hour telephone counselling service): 13 11 14
- GSAHS ACCESSLINE (24 hour crisis service): 1800 800 944
- SALVO CARE LINE: 1300 36 36 22
### Appendix B – Interview Schedules, Context Setting Form and Focus Group Schedule

**Table B1**  
*Development of The Interview Schedules*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-constructed areas of inquiry</th>
<th>Source of influence</th>
<th>Application to research design</th>
<th>Key terms and questions</th>
<th>When to inquire about it</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural background (building the co-construction relationship through getting to know who they are)</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Setting context form/questions</td>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>First interview</td>
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<td>Higher education</td>
<td>Follow-up employment status in second and final interview, where relevant</td>
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<td>Personal background</td>
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<td>(motivations to join and currently be in social work)</td>
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<td>Previous and current employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding impacts of the co-construction relationship</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Motivations; impacts of participation</td>
<td>Motivations to participate in the study; what they would like to get out of it.</td>
<td>First interview</td>
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<td>Motivations to continue with participation.</td>
<td>Second/final interview</td>
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<td>Impacts of participation in the research</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse lived experience of identity, including how it is fostered</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Asking for concrete descriptions of lived experience</td>
<td>On a scale of 1 – 10 how would you rate confidence in your social work identity?</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and literature review</td>
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<td>What does that number look like? How was that number reached?</td>
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<td>Pre-constructed areas of inquiry</td>
<td>Source of influence</td>
<td>Application to research design</td>
<td>Key terms and questions</td>
<td>When to inquire about it</td>
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<td>Describe a concrete experience that fostered social work identity</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
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<td>What happened (who, what, where and when) – feelings, thoughts and behaviours?</td>
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<td>What was the experience like, including quality of the experience?</td>
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<td>Other relationships and activities that foster identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diverse lived experience, including how it is eroded</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Asking for concrete descriptions of lived experience</td>
<td>How might that number go down?</td>
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<td>Describe a concrete experience that eroded social work identity.</td>
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<td>What happened (who, what, where and when) – feelings, thoughts and behaviours?</td>
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<td>What was the experience like?</td>
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<td>Preferences for the experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-constructed areas of inquiry</td>
<td>Source of influence</td>
<td>Application to research design</td>
<td>Key terms and questions</td>
<td>When to inquire about it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being (ontology)</td>
<td>Definition of professional identity and theoretical framework</td>
<td>Lived experience of social work identity</td>
<td>Can anyone <em>be</em> a social worker? What is your worldview as a social worker? What does it mean to <em>be</em> a social worker? What does it mean to <em>be</em> a newly qualified social worker?</td>
<td>First interview All interviews Second interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing/Thinking (epistemology)</td>
<td>Definition of professional identity and theoretical framework</td>
<td>Knowledge and theory used as a social worker</td>
<td>What theory/knowledge do you use as a social worker? How does it connect to your identity? Has your use of theory changed over the last six months?</td>
<td>All interviews First interview Second and final interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing (methodology)</td>
<td>Definition of professional identity and theoretical framework</td>
<td>Practice as a social worker</td>
<td>What methods/skills do you use as a social worker? How do these connect to your identity? Have your skills changed over the last six months?</td>
<td>All interviews First interview Second and final interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-constructed areas of inquiry</td>
<td>Source of influence</td>
<td>Application to research design</td>
<td>Key terms and questions</td>
<td>When to inquire about it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical reflection within the co-construction relationship</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Who/what contributes to and/or influences constructions and maintenance of social work identity.</td>
<td>What is the dominant story of identity here?</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What messages (or dominant discourses) about social work identity do you receive from others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honouring participants’ lived experience</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Overall reflections and advice for others</td>
<td>What message/advice would you give to others?</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Summing up what this whole year has been like – highs/lows (optional artefact representing the journey)</td>
<td>Final interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured approach</td>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Balance of open and closed questions.</td>
<td>Reinforce semi-structured nature at the beginning of each interview (the priority is their story and voice)</td>
<td>All interviews</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Examples:</td>
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<td>Choose and describe an experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other examples of experiences you wish to discuss?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-constructed areas of inquiry</td>
<td>Source of influence</td>
<td>Application to research design</td>
<td>Key terms and questions</td>
<td>When to inquire about it</td>
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<td>Are there other points you wish to discuss?</td>
<td>Are there other points you wish to discuss?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there anything you wanted to specifically cover today?</td>
<td>Is there anything you wanted to specifically cover today?</td>
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<td>Anything else you would like to discuss or ask?</td>
<td>Anything else you would like to discuss or ask?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Setting context form

This form aims to gather some basic demographic information and personal/professional details that are part of setting context to the first year of professional practice. There are 5 sections and completion should take 10 – 15 min depending on responses. Most are short answer questions.

Originally, I envisaged this would be fully addressed during the first interview. However, to save some time I developed this form as an option to be completed beforehand.

Please note completion of this form before your first interview is optional. Whether you complete it or not, we will revisit it during the first interview to discuss key information and anything further you might want to add. If you have any further questions please contact me.

Please email your completed form to: bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

Responses can be typed in the box below each question. You are welcome to write in-depth answers where you deem necessary.

Section one – Demographic details

Age:

Gender:

Ethnic identity:

Religion/spirituality:

Where do you live?

- Please indicate whether this is a rural, remote, metropolitan area, etc
- Please indicate how long you have lived in this area

Location:

Area:

Length:

Have you had to move for your work?
Please add anything else you think is relevant:

Section two – Higher education background

What higher education qualifications (e.g. certificates, diploma, degree, etc.) have you attained?

- Please indicate the institution and year (when) it was attained.
  1. First qualification:
     a. Institution of first qualification:
     b. When:
  2. Second qualification:
     a. Institution of second qualification:
     b. When:

Please add more if necessary:

For your CSU social work degree, what was your overall study mode (on-campus, off-campus, blended)?

For your CSU social work degree, when did you study and for how long?

Started when:

Finished when:

Length of study:

For your CSU social work degree, did you study mostly full-time or part-time?

For your CSU social work degree, where were your field placements?

- Please indicate agency type, role, type of placement (direct, indirect or mixed)

First placement:

- Agency type:
- Role:
- Placement type:

Second placement:

- Agency type:
• Role:
• Placement type:

Please add anything else you think is relevant:

Section three – Personal background

What *were* your motivations and/or reasons for becoming a social worker?

What *are* your current motivations and/or reasons for being a social worker?

Please add anything else you think is relevant:

Section four – Previous employment

Before finishing your CSU social work degree, did you work in the social work and human services sector? If yes, please indicate how long.

Whilst studying your CSU social work degree, were you employed at all within the Social Work and Human Services sector?

For this job/s what was the agency type (e.g. government, NGO, etc.)?

What was your length of employment?

What was your job title?

What was your role and overall duties?

If relevant, what were your supervision arrangements (who, when, etc.)?

What was it like being in this position/s whilst studying?

Please add anything else you think is relevant:

Section five – Current employment in social work and human services

How did you gain your current main job?

If relevant, what was the job seeking process like?

What is your agency type (e.g. government, NGO, etc.)?

When did you start in this position?
What is your type of employment (e.g. full-time, part-time, casual, contract, etc.)

What is your job title?

What is your role and overall duties?

Does the position require a social work qualification?

If NO, please specify what is required:

Are there other social workers in your organisation? If so, what type of contact do you have with them?

What are your supervision arrangements (who, when, etc.)?

What professional development opportunities are there?

Did you intend on being in this area? Tell me more:

Please add anything else you think is relevant:

That is it! Thank you for your time.
First interview schedule.

Welcome and rapport building

- Introductions, outline context of today
- review research purpose and ethical points

Motivations to participate

- Why did you decide to participate in the study?
- What would you like to get out of participation?

Review setting context form

Being – what it means to be a social worker

- Can anyone be a social worker?
- How do you see the world as a social worker?
- What does it mean to be a social worker?
- How confident are you in your social work identity (scale 1-10)?
- What does that number look like? How did you get to that number?
- What fosters that number?

Describe an experience that fostered your social work identity

- Who, what, where and when?
- Thoughts, feelings and behaviours present.
- What was the experience like, including quality of the experience?

Describe an experience that eroded your social work identity

- What erodes that number?
- Who, what, where and when?
- Thoughts, feelings and behaviours present.
- What was the experience like, including quality of experience?
- Preferences for the experience

Knowing/Thinking – knowledge and theory used as a social worker

- Knowledge and theory used as a social worker
- Connections to identity
Doing – methods and skills used as a social worker

- Methods and skills used as a social worker
- Connections to identity

Key issues and discourses (messages) noticed around social work identity

- What do we think is the dominant story of identity here?
- What messages about SW identity do you receive from others?

Reflection – what you want others to know about experiences and identity

- What have you gotten out of today?
- Message for an audience of your choice

Conclude and wrap up – confirm follow up details
Second interview schedule.

Welcome

- Outline context of today

Continuing motivations to participate

- Why are you still involved in the study?

Six-month reflection – highlights, changes and development

- What have the last six months been like?
- What is it like being in your current position?
- Professional development opportunities
- Supervision arrangements
- Intentions to be in this area

Current setting context (if necessary)

- What is your current job title?
- How did you gain your current main job?
- Have you had to move for work?
- If relevant, what was the job seeking process like?
- What is your agency type?
- When did you start in this position?
- What is your type of employment (e.g. full-time)
- What is your role and overall duties?
- What is the minimum qualification of your position?
- Are there other social workers in your organisation?

Fostering identity

- How confident are you in your social work identity (scale 1-10)?
- What does that number look like?
- How did you get to that number? What fosters that number?
- Describe a particular experience that fostered identity
Erosion of identity

• What might take that number down? What erodes that number?
• Describe a particular experience that eroded identity

Being – what it means to be a social worker

• What does it mean to be a social worker?
• What does it mean to be a newly qualified social worker?

Knowing/Thinking – theory and knowledge used as a social worker

• What theory and knowledge do you use?
• Has your use of theory changed over the last six months?

Doing – skills and methods used as a social worker

• What skills and methods do you use as a social worker?
• Has your use of methods and skills changed over the last six months?

Key issues and discourses (messages) noticed around social work identity

• What do we think is the dominant story of identity here?
• What messages about SW identity do you receive from others?

Final reflection – outcomes and experiences

• What have you gotten out of today?
• Message for an audience of your choice

Conclude and wrap up – confirm follow up details
Final interview schedule.

Welcome

- Outline context of today

Continuing motivations to participate

- Why are you still involved in the study?

Six-month reflection – highlights, changes and development

- What have the last six months been like?
- What is it like being in your current position?
- Professional development opportunities
- Supervision arrangements
- Intentions to be in this area

Current setting context (if necessary)

- What is your current job title?
- How did you gain your current main job?
- Have you had to move for work?
- If relevant, what was the job seeking process like?
- What is your agency type?
- When did you start in this position?
- What is your type of employment (e.g. full-time)
- What is your role and overall duties?
- What is the minimum qualification of your position?
- Are there other social workers in your organisation?

Fostering identity

- How confident are you in your social work identity (scale 1-10)?
- What does that number look like?
- How did you get to that number?
- What would take that number up?
- Describe a particular experience that fostered identity
Erosion of identity

- What might take that number down? What erodes that number?
- Describe a particular experience that eroded identity

Being – what it means to be a social worker

- What does it mean to be a social worker?
- Has your being-as-a-social worker changed?

Knowing/Thinking – theory and knowledge used as a social worker

- What theory and knowledge do you use?
- Has your use of theory changed over the last six months?

Doing – skills and methods used as a social worker

- What skills and methods do you use as a social worker?
- Has your use of methods and skills changed over the last six months?

Dominant story of identity

- What do we think is the dominant story of identity here?
- What messages about SW identity do you receive from others?

Reflection on the past 12 months

- What have the last 12 months been like as a NQSW?
- Optional artefact that represents journey and identity

Final reflection – outcomes and experiences

- Advice for other new graduates (or yourself 12 months ago)
- Advice for employers/employing organisations
- Advice for former lecturers
- What have you gotten out of today?

Conclude and wrap up – confirm follow up details

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Focus group schedule.

1. Welcome, introductions and outline context of today
2. Share key themes and check accuracy.
3. Are there any other questions/themes people were interested in asking others?
4. Where could we go from here (participants, study results, future options)?
5. Is there anything further you would like to add?
6. Conclude and wrap up – confirm any follow up details (where to from here)
### Appendix C – Topic Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Topic Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Advice</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Advice for the profession and society</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Advice for educators</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Advice for employers</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Advice for emerging newly qualified social workers and students</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Advice to self</td>
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<td>Being valued</td>
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<td>Beliefs and worldviews</td>
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<td>Consolidating social work identity</td>
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<td>Workload needs</td>
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### Table C1

*Thematic Codes With Analytic Codes*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Codes</th>
<th>Analytic codes:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thematic code – Demographics and background</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gender (demographics)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Religion-spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>• Moving for work</td>
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<td>Higher education</td>
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<td>• Studying off-campus</td>
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<td>• Work-study</td>
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<td>Employment</td>
<td>• Job title</td>
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<td>• Job-seeking experiences</td>
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<td>• Minimum qualification</td>
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<td>• Roles and duties</td>
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<td>• Employment goals</td>
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<td>• Job satisfaction</td>
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<td>Thematic code – Transition and adjustment</td>
<td>Transition and Adjustment From University</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Disconnecting from university (anti-climax)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Transition events (completion of study; graduation; practice events)</td>
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<td>Transition and Adjustment to the Practice Field</td>
<td>• Orientation/induction (metaphors)</td>
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<td>• Reality (expectations; culture shock)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Preparedness for practice (theory and practice subject)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition and Adjustment to Professional Identity</td>
<td>• Consolidating social work identity</td>
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<td>• Clarifying distinct identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Settling into social work identity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Thematic Codes

Thematic code – Lived experience of social work identity

Analytic codes:
Being a social worker
- Social work mindset (values and ethics; beliefs and worldviews);
- Personal and professional fit (good fit; meaningful purpose [motivations for joining social work; vocation]; personal life [boundaries]);
- Perceptions of professionalism (social work qualification; critical reflection [lifelong learning; self-awareness])

Knowing/Thinking as social worker
Doing as a social worker
- Communication (presence; dress)

Thematic code – Growth and development (micro)

Analytic codes:
Impacts of education
- Foundation
- Pre-social work versus post-social work
- Field placement experiences

Lived time and experience – Temporality
- Life-experience
- Field-experience
- Life-stage
- Gaining experience (perceptions of being newly qualified)

Confidence
- Learning (personal style; successful outcomes [competence-proficiency]; embracing uncertainty; doing it right)
- Personal growth and development (self-concept; self-esteem; strengths)
- Expressing identity (affirmations; role identity versus social work identity [role limitations])

Thematic code - Connectedness (Meso)

Analytic codes:
Collective identity
- Shared membership and language (social worker relationships)
- Like-mindedness

Meaningful relationships
- Managers
Thematic Codes

- Supervision
- Personal relationships
- Networks
- Role models (observational practice; ideal versus poor practice)
- Mentors
- Lecturers

Team culture
- Multi-disciplinary settings (colleagues)

Organisational culture
- Stress and burnout (bullying experiences; burnout experiences; vicarious trauma; enculturation [organisational fit])
- Recruitment issues
- Resignation (leaving social work; turnover of staff)

Thematic code – Environmental influences (macro) on professional identity

Analytic codes:
Physical environment
- Personal office space
- Wider office space
- Rural social work

Socio-cultural environment
- Dominant discourses and perceptions (social work versus psychology; gender; hierarchy; wages; reputation; diversity of social work)

Support and development needs
- Nurturing environments (being valued [feedback and performance management]; autonomy; professional development [post-graduate study]; professional self-care [workload needs; coping; work-life balance])

Thematic code – Experiences of study participation

Analytic codes:
Motivations to participate
- Identity development as motivation to participate
- Helping others
- Mutual help
- Other reasons for study participation

Impacts of participation
- Opportunities for reflection
Thematic Codes

- Clarification (consolidation; ideas for action)
- Therapeutic and emotional impacts

Thematic code – Advice

Analytic codes:
Advice for emerging newly qualified social workers and students
Advice to self
Advice for educators
Advice for employers
Advice for the profession and society
Appendix D – Field Note Template

Date: Location: Participant:

Part one – describing the event (observational)

1. Details around: time/date/context
2. What was I thinking as I went into this?
3. What happened (who, what, where and when)?
4. What did I observe
   a. verbal and non-verbal communication
   b. Lived bodily observations of self and participant
5. What were my feelings throughout the event?

Part two – reflecting on the event (theoretical)

6. Why did this particular event take place?
7. What were the particular highlights – what stood out?
8. What were my impressions of the event?
9. Did something that I wasn’t expecting occur?
10. Did something occur that sat uncomfortably with me?

Part three – general theorising (methodological and analytical)

1. Key experiential words mentioned?
2. What were some key messages around identity?
3. What are my initial notes (ideas) to follow up later?
4. What is informing my notes (e.g. assumptions, socio-political and cultural considerations)?
5. Do your notes (ideas) relate to your background history in any way?
6. Do your notes (ideas) relate to any particular literature in this area?
7. Is there anything I could be overlooking?
8. How would I summarise this whole event?
9. Anything that requires clarification or follow up?
## Appendix E – Participant Journeys

### Table E1

**Isabella**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>6-7/10</td>
<td>7.5/10</td>
<td>9/10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>For now I’m settled, but no it’s not the only job I’ll ever have and it’s not the only field I’ll ever work in</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Staying with the organisation but re-assessing options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Higher education at both TAFE and university has been transformative</td>
<td>Greater personal and professional confidence. Plans for post-graduate study/research next year</td>
<td>Increased self-awareness around impacts of vicarious trauma. Temporarily moving into a management position. Reviewing what it means to have quality of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Beliefs and worldview; lived experience of identity; personal and professional fit; professionalism; values and ethics</td>
<td>Support and development; growth and development; meaningful relationships; identity transition and adjustment; personal and professional fit</td>
<td>Personal and professional fit; confidence; support and development; learning; lived experience of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I guess I have a very strong conviction that social work is absolutely meaningful, that it does facilitate change in individuals, in groups, in whole communities, that social work is quite powerful, but often in subtle ways. I have total conviction with that.</td>
<td>I’m grasping that social work identity. It’s settling more over me like a very comfortable cloak, so to speak, one that I don’t even have to think about taking off as much</td>
<td>Really changed, yeah I think it’s shifting sands for me all the time and I just put that down to a journey of growth and exploration really you know</td>
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</table>
First interview. Isabella came to social work accidentally but found it to be a meaningful fit with her passions. Social work study provided further professional skill, knowledge and ability to achieve tangible outcomes: “Social change is more, to me it was more accessible [in social work]”.

Her education at TAFE and university was transformative due to the critical reflection, self-awareness and growth that it fostered: “…by the end of the year I was so drawn in and intrigued and so changed. So trans-, so unexpectedly transformed by it [Certificate IV studies]”.

These remained important parts of her professional identity, particularly since losing the connection to the formal social work university setting.

Isabella had been working in women’s services for several years within different roles, and was currently involved with a domestic violence program and an education program. Connectedness to other professionals and social workers was meaningful, especially for informal mentoring opportunities and observing role models. External supervision was experienced as a highly valuable activity: “Every time I come out of supervision, I feel a stronger conviction in myself about who I am. And my professional identity is stronger”.

Isabella maintained an affirmation during her studies that contributed to fostering her professional identity:

…to get through that study, to see myself completing that study and becoming a qualified social worker, I actually told myself I already was one. Way before I was qualified, but I was like, I can do this, because I am a social worker. In my heart, deep inside, I am a social worker. I am doing this, I am completing this, no questions asked. So I’m doing this assignment, and that was actually an affirmation tool I used.

Isabella reflected extensively on what it means to be a social worker and the close connection between personal and professional aspects of self.

Main interpretation: Social work identity is based on strong connections between personal and professional aspects of self.

Second interview. Isabella was becoming increasingly settled into her professional identity. Over recent months, Isabella noticed unexpected but worthwhile shifts that
had personal and professional benefits: “...so I’ve become more confident in myself and because I’ve become more confident in myself and more positive, I’m having an easier time and work is much, much more satisfying to me now”.

Supervision and commitment to growth were the main factors leading to these changes. On the other hand, Isabella was concerned she was no longer directly linking theory to practice in the way that was done during studies and her initial transition: “...so I’ve lost that connection because I’ve stopped studying, but the shifts that have happened in my social work identity, I think have been more subtle”.

Isabella was conscious of a lack of time and resources within her program, organisation and beyond to engage in lifelong learning. A sense of connectedness to social work philosophy, theory and changes became a challenge. Isabella wondered if this was having an impact on her professional identity but realised, as the interview unfolded, she had grown personally which had positive impacts on her professional work and identity. It was found, her relationship to theory had developed in new ways:

“It’s those just core, core theory things the client based perspective, the professional communication and the duty of care and I mean, that kind of stuff’s definitely assimilated. And I guess a part of me is always, one small little part of me somewhere, the 5 per cent is always thinking from a multidimensional perspective...”

Her focus was on ensuring that knowledge and skill remained current. Isabella was active in identifying and working towards embedding activities that would allow for further growth, development and self-awareness.

Main interpretation: Transitioning away from university can be challenging but one can continue to grow in unexpected and powerful ways.

Final interview. After further reflection, Isabella was glad not to have pursued much reading and postgraduate study, as her personal journey had been significant over the whole year: “I’ve just realised that while that brain’s resting I’ve got quite an intuitive and spiritual sort of development happening and maybe the both can’t happen too much at once when there’s concentrated activity in the one area”.

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A constant theme throughout the year for Isabella was the connection between the personal and professional. Isabella was now re-assessing her employment goals and future opportunities, as self-awareness around experiencing vicarious trauma had developed. Isabella’s social work identity had still grown, and her journey of personal and professional confidence had continued: “…it takes its seat and settles right in like being on the sand at the beach and digging your bum into the sand even more and more and that’s what it feels like”.

To express her 12-month journey, Isabella shared several artefacts:

1. Statue:
   A: …very much a spiritual object and that’s that personal growth and the spiritual growth.
   
   Q: And certainly the growth of you yeah.
   
   A: Yes, that’s almost the guiding, that’s a bit like the guiding light you know if I’m in the right place there which this reminds me of then I’m in the right place everywhere else I need to be.

2. Swan:
   
   …it’s a holder of things and you can – I don’t know I can metaphorically put whatever I need to do. I hold my tools, I hold my experience, I hold my wisdom, I hold my social connections, I hold everything my creativity in there.

3. Card one:
   
   …she has a ring of fire around her and that’s all sorts of possibilities and magic and power within, empowering her to basically to go and do what she needs to do…and she has various artefacts and things and wands and tools and ritual objects in there so that’s a kind of how I feel about that

4. Card two:
   
   …women who are building a wall together and they’re sharing the work so that’s very much a building process and how it’s dependent on cooperation and sharing so it’s very much how it’s been where I’ve been working.
5. Card three:

...having a higher purpose to me and that being focused and always maintaining that – well to me it’s a spirituality but I’ll just call it a higher purpose and certainly in terms of my workplace practice that’s where this is like how we are always above everything we do we’re always maintaining a feminist practice of empowering.

These artefacts reflect Isabella’s social work identity and how it was fostered through her connectedness to the profession and relationship with others.

Main interpretation: Personal growth and development can be very powerful and have important implications for professional growth and development. This is achieved through individual and wider relationships and support.
**Table E2**

*Geraldine*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>5.5/10</td>
<td>6-7/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Staying in current role but interested in new opportunities as well</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Yeah still keeping options open. But also being a little bit more proactive about making the most of where I am and building on that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Noticeable difference between pre and post-study of social work</td>
<td>Articulating theory verbally on a regular basis</td>
<td>More settled into social work identity Exploring postgraduate study options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; pre-social work versus post-social work; employment; being a social worker; supervision</td>
<td>Being valued; support and development; meaningful relationships; organisational culture; employment</td>
<td>Self-care; growth and development; employment; university transition and adjustment; support and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>[Social work identity] It actually has given me um something to hang my coat up on.</td>
<td>I guess it doesn’t necessarily even have to be acknowledgement around being a social worker it’s just about doing a good job, I don’t think anyone can operate in a vacuum. And I don’t care who you are you do need constructive criticism of course but you also need some acknowledgement that you’re doing a good job.</td>
<td>And I think I have changed. I think I have changed in the last 12 months. I kind of hope I have. I just feel a bit more comfortable in my own skin I suppose.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First interview. Geraldine had a long-term interest in social work and came to the profession as a mature-aged student, with over 25 years of experience in the human services sector. Her current role was in the domestic violence field as a program manager. This role included direct work with clients as well as program management responsibilities.

Geraldine reflected on what she was like before social work, and what she was like now after graduation. Geraldine noticed how university study led her to acquire important professional skills around self-awareness and reflective processes: “[Pre-social work] For me if I wasn’t constantly looking at myself. And my behaviours…”; “[Post-social work] And I think it has given ah, me some resources to be able to process things in a much more productive way”.

Geraldine also emphasised experiencing a sense of collective identity by becoming a social worker. There was a sense of shared membership, language and resources with other social workers. Geraldine was still becoming used to her social work identity and reinforced the importance of ongoing critical reflection and professional development. These reflected important parts of being a social worker. Connections to other social workers, feedback and evaluation, and validation of becoming a social worker were seen to be part of fostering professional identity.

Challenges with professional identity included tensions between her funding and auspice bodies, who wanted to influence her role. Consequently, her social work identity was de-valued or overlooked at times. Geraldine considered the significance of being specifically titled a social worker and how this might provide further validation and professional identity.

Main interpretation: Sharing in a collective identity based on shared membership, language and mindset is a meaningful part of becoming a social worker.

Second interview. Geraldine continued in her current position but remained open to other opportunities, particularly as part of being valued as a social work professional. It was meaningful to be recognised as a social worker by others, such as when they encouraged her to apply for social work positions: “Well, it was actually quite reaffirming it was, like, okay, I’ve got an identity and the same when my old supervisor was actually saying I want you to apply... ”
Geraldine reflected on how organisational dynamics can be more difficult than client work, and contribute to seeking other employment. Geraldine still enjoyed her area of work and continued to try and positively change organisational cultures.

Geraldine also continued to implement self-care strategies as part of dealing with organisational challenges and workload. External supervision remained a particularly important part of this for reflection and identifying relevant strategies. While identifying self-care as a strength Geraldine highlighted that erosion of professional identity could come about for practitioners who do not engage with it meaningfully.

Geraldine rated confidence in her social work identity consistently but clarified the difference as follows:

[graduation period] …a little bit of a high because you get your piece of paper-
And I think you’re still floating on that a little bit and that sense of achievement that I did it, I finished, I’ve got the piece of paper to prove it.

This reinforced the fluidity and personal nature of the scale. Geraldine also described changes as she moved further from university and the connectedness that once existed when embedded in “social work talk”:

…I think you kind of move further away. And so that dialogue, the memories dim, the dialogue you’re not having it and that’s why it’s only ever recaptured here when those moments happen where I can have that dialogue. It’s a little bit with my co-worker when we can talk about different approaches to working with clients…You feel it but I’m seeing as my eyes light up I’m feeling me getting and we’re getting off and bouncing ideas backwards and forwards and it is stimulating and you don’t have that without the foundation.

Despite these changes, Geraldine found her articulation of theory and skills continued to grow as a result of interactions with social workers, especially a colleague in her program.

Main interpretation: Being recognised as a social worker by others can be an important validating experience for professional identity.

Final interview: Geraldine stated that there had been highs and low over the last 12 to 18 months but she had now entered a more positive period. This was characterised by settling into her social work identity and some key turning points that saw positive
changes within organisational dynamics. For example, moving into another building proved to be a good cultural change that Geraldine anticipated. Applying for funding saw colleagues unite due to the difficult environment experienced within the NGO sector: “But within our organisation I can actually see that that’s – the people – we actually have come together and are supporting each other”.

Her experiences reinforced the importance of interdependent relationships with others. Geraldine continued to build on her professional identity through connectedness with social workers, as well as growth and development within colleague interactions:

...what’s shifted – and I actually looked at my behaviour as well and how I was responding to situations. And I changed that because I realised I probably could’ve responded a lot better...And I guess what I needed to do too is recognise that I need to allow people to change as well.

This was another example of lifelong learning and development that Geraldine described as a fundamental part of being a social worker.

Geraldine’s artefact was a kit provided during a self-care lecture during her final residential school. This kit was referred to throughout our interviews, as Geraldine reflected on the meaningful significance of her educational experiences:

But I think I'll actually talk about the little bag and I have it, it’s still in my drawer in my room and why is it important, because it reminds me of that time. It is an artefact now, stale Minty and all... And it reminded me of there were some really important messages in that little spiel about looking after yourself and all that. But there also was humour in it and they had a good sense of humour. And I do remember the whole group actually starting to laugh afterwards. And that actually has stayed with me...

The items in the kit connected well to Geraldine’s journey and reminded her of the importance of self-care and being valued by others as a social worker, which was a key theme she reflected on throughout the year.

Main interpretation: It can take time to settle in to social work identity.
### Michael

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>7-8/10</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Staying in current role and interested in private practice sometime in the future</td>
<td>Same and dependent on family needs</td>
<td>Ready for something more challenging and aims to go into private practice soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Field placement in workplace was particularly useful for expanding current hospital role to have a significant community focus</td>
<td>Personal and professional change as a result of becoming a father – continuing to develop self-awareness</td>
<td>Undertaking post-grad psychology study as part of building clinical knowledge for private practice. Achieved significant personal growth over the year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived space; beliefs and worldviews; rural social work; motivations for joining social work; impacts of education</td>
<td>Growth and development; lived experience of identity; personal and professional fit; learning; being a social worker</td>
<td>Growth and development; personal growth and development; learning; self-concept; support and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>…a seven or an eight is, I now have the piece of paper. I have a year and a half of learning under my belt, I’ve been able to sit in this chair confidently learn the role, keep on going, and now I feel I’ve hit a level of this plastic ceiling I like to call it, it’s a bit bendy…</td>
<td>I am understanding myself better with the result of [my son] being born and it’s just sort of helping me to be a better social worker at the same time, so it’s a good double edged sword in that way</td>
<td>If you ask me what the last 12 months has been about, it’s more about me growing up more than social work</td>
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</table>
First interview. Michael joined social work as part of a career and personal change. He had a long-term interest in human services work that was also influenced by various personal relationships: “...And there was this intrinsic part to please, but to, make a person’s life a little bit better or easier or whatever you wanna call it”.

By the time of reaching his university studies, Michael had 12 years’ experience in the sector. These experiences contributed greatly to Michael’s development and professional identity. Prior experience was also useful for his current role as a rural hospital social worker: “I think a lot of life experience and time in working with people in crisis and all that sort of stuff, and doing [another] job before the social work job really prepared me to step into it”.

His field placement provided an ideal opportunity to extend his hospital role to include a community focus. These opportunities enabled Michael to build on previous activities, through facilitating health projects, and engage in preventative work within the community: “...it makes sense to get out with someone and knock it on the head before the person’s come in”.

Michael attributed his identity development to previous professional experience, commitment to lifelong learning and professional development, completion of studies, time and experience within his current role and, supervision. Michael had engaged in supervision for many years before becoming a social worker. It was found to be a vital activity for self-care and development.

Michael reflected frequently on the unique experiences of living and working in a rural area. He talked about how social workers must have a very clear understanding of their motivations for practice and ensure it reflects professionalism rather than personal gain. Michael planned to develop a social work network within a several-hundred-kilometre radius as part of addressing isolation as a rural practitioner and building learning opportunities through connectedness with other hospital social workers.

Main interpretation: Prior experience can contribute to developing professional identity; which can help in a rural context, where one must have professional boundaries and motivations for the work they undertake.

Second interview. At this point, Michael reinforced the importance of lifelong learning as part of being a social worker, and university education as a developmental
process: “...it’s important to get the message across to people that you step into a journey that – you get your piece of paper and that’s not it – that’s just not the end of it...”

For his own journey, a major event was the birth of his first child several months earlier. This personal event was a catalyst for further personal growth and development through critical reflection, self-awareness, self-care and re-prioritising his life:

I have had some pretty big events from a work perspective pop up that have really challenged me emotionally and the last six months I have probably dealt with them better than I would have six months previously. Because [my son] has helped give me perspective about what’s really important.

I have spent a lot of time with the reflection of my supervisor, that I have done a lot of time doing things and I am a very good doer and I can get myself out in the community and in newspapers and on radio and do good social work. I think the part that I needed to get onto now, and I am glad I’m getting onto now is the being. Who am I as a person in this role, in this world, in this environment?

Michael was actively working on self-knowledge and had several successful personal and professional experiences of achieving change. Michael continued to emphasise the importance of relationships as part of nurturing his professional identity, such as supervision, mentors and networking and, being a mentor for a TAFE student. His advice for other social workers reinforced the journey of self-discovery:

...go and do your professional development – get the support to do it, fight to have professional development so that you can build your professional identity, but more importantly the stuff that I’m learning at the moment is don’t be afraid to actually look deeper into that and look at yourself because the knowledge of self is really what drives the process.

This captured Michael’s learning, in that growth and development was not over when university study ended; the journey continued in new and intense ways. Michael said that simply having the qualification does not mean one is being a social worker; they have to live up to the ideals of the profession every day.
Main interpretation: The first year is another important journey of learning and development, including personal growth.

Final interview. Michael had successfully achieved the self-knowledge and growth he had aimed for:

*If you ask me what my priorities have been, I’ve been working along just doing this job now, and just sort of getting into self-discovery, self-knowledge, and then implementing that into being a good dad and a good worker; that’s really been my journey.*

He was more comfortable in himself and confident to be authentic. His practice skills became more attuned and he was finding postgraduate psychology study easier to undertake as there were less internal distractions. This confidence led to being more comfortable with the reality that some clients will dislike social workers for interventions that might be necessary, such as when harm is involved: “*But I’m in a pretty good spot where I can understand what this person’s done and capable of, and why that person doesn’t like me and finds me as interfering*.”

Michael’s artefact was a photo of his son who was a major catalyst for change and growth:

*That is what I’ve looked at [the photo] for the last 12 months and now I’ve got one on the computer, and that’s his – that was a version of yes, thank you, thank you to everyone for [my son] coming – but the look is just brilliant it’s a great thing for you to take away with you because half of the reason I’m being better at who I am now, is because of that little moment happening, and he’s a charmer, he’s brilliant and he’s lovely, and it’s probably the only treasure that I’ve got that I really would consider if I lost that, then anything else I could lose I’d be fine. It wouldn’t matter.*

Michael kept this photo nearby at work, as a reminder of his journey, his priorities and the close relationship between personal and professional aspects of self.

Main interpretation: It is important to be dedicated to growth and development, and be able to access opportunities to facilitate the journey.
Table E4

**Gary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity scale</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/10 approximately</td>
<td>6-7/10</td>
<td>6/10</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment goals</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applying for several positions and still deciding what to pursue. Interested in Health.</td>
<td>Staying in current position but remains under review: …the next 12-month focus really is primarily on securing the work and getting all those sort of practices under my belt and knowing the job and then…And then sort of looking at, well, is this where we want to live</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field placement experiences were a positive challenge. Decision-making around job opportunities</td>
<td>Took position in a remote area</td>
<td>Continuing on a positive path and embracing challenges. Receiving positive feedback from organisation and clients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five most prevalent topic codes</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lived experience of identity; impacts of dominant discourses; dominant discourses; employment; being a social worker</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; transition and adjustment into practice; employment; perceptions of being newly qualified; being a social worker</td>
<td>Employment; growth and development; lived space; support and development; lived experience of identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key quotes</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…for me it’s been about being very firm, and knowing the foundations of who I am I think as a person, and then as a worker, and then how I will you know, despatch that work effectively to either clients or patients</td>
<td>I still have an ideal about who I want to be as a professional. That image is fairly clear in my head; it’s whether or not I’ll be able to achieve that.</td>
<td>I think I’m approaching pretty confident about things – and confident in a sense of knowing where to get the information, how to get it that’s where I’m confident.</td>
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</table>
First interview. After many years in the nursing sector, Gary was interested in pursuing less physical work and more psycho-social positions, which would see him valued for his knowledge and skill. Social work was eventually pursued as part of achieving these goals, and he was drawn to the diverse employment opportunities available in the profession. Gary’s religious beliefs also played a major role in being within a service profession.

Gary had been accepted into a government social work graduate program that was to begin in several months but he was open to other job opportunities. He reflected on wider discourses that can influence job-seeking decisions as social work can be a low-paid position, particularly in the non-government sector. Gary was also motivated to be challenged in order to continue growing and achieving long-term goals:

…but I do have an ambition to sort of go overseas at some point...and be a social worker, and you know I guess at my age I’m sort of thinking well I’d like to just keep a momentum of progressively having jobs that are challenging.

At this point, Gary had achieved a development of skills, which had contributed to his professional identity. Although there was still room to grow: “There are still things that I’m, you know, the ground sort of at times still feels uneven...well I think my professional identity's always going to be a growth aspect”.

One area included gaining experience with clients and colleagues, and continuing to achieve successful outcomes. As part of this, Gary emphasised being focused on professional development and self-awareness. He found it useful to observe various professionals, to consider attributes and ways of being: “…but you know I look at some professionals and I think, yeah I’d like to be like that person”.

This helped Gary to reflect on and articulate what it means to be a social worker.

Main interpretation: When one emerges from university, there is still learning and development to achieve including articulating and developing professional identity.

Second interview. After further reflection, Gary took up a government position in a remote area because it better reflected his goals: “…this job is going to something really new and different and challenging and I might not get this experience again. So that was the sort of sealer for the whole deal really”.
This geographical and lifestyle change was the biggest adjustment Gary had to make, as well as the experience of transitioning into practice.

Gary had been in the position for several months doing induction and building his workload. During this period, Gary had been well supported, which contributed to his transition and adjustment greatly:

...the five-week induction was fantastic. I felt very well supported and since my move from the coast here, they’ve just been fantastic in terms of helping me to relocate, support to my family, and providing education and even now, being in a new office with people, it’s just been fantastic what they’ve done in terms of allocating a senior social worker to be there and guide us through...

Gary observed the difference between being a nurse who was mostly supervised to becoming a social worker, who can exercise significant power over others. Gary maintained critical self-awareness because of this level of responsibility:

Yeah and it’s taken a bit of an adjustment really. But all that said, I still feel every day before I walk into that workplace, I say to myself, “This is about the customer. It’s not about me.” At the end of the day, I’m working for them not for myself or anything relative to me.

Gary found his work to be very rewarding: “Well, it’s in progress. It’s something that’s building. I think because I’m still learning the business, once I feel confident and proficient in that I think then I can start to put my own slant on it”.

He was building his professional identity and way of being a social worker.

Main interpretation: It can take time to learn and build professional identity, so you must keep ideals front and centre and be critically reflective.

Final interview. Gary remained on a positive path: “And I feel I’m developing a fairly good knowledge base, I’m getting good affirmation about my current practices and so far, so good”.

There were many complexities to his role but Gary was guided by his value-base in order to live up to what it means to be a social worker: “I mean, you could be really brought down by things perhaps organisationally, perhaps even in the workplace. I
think you’ve got to remain focussed about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it”.

Gary found, as a remote worker, being connected to management and social workers online through a communication portal was a vital means of support and approval of work.

Anticipating the future, Gary looked forward to facing a range of challenges:

*I’ve got a pretty strong feeling in my mind just where we’re going budgetary speaking, I’ll be asked to do a lot more. So and I like those challenges, I like to work a little bit harder and have a lot of things going on. So I’ll enjoy that.*

To balance these challenges and depict his journey, Gary’s artefact was a scale that represented work–life:

*I have this picture in my mind of a set of scales where I have my work on one side of the scale and my lifestyle on the other. At times, they’re at even, but sometimes the work will be more important to me than the workplace, rather than home. But I just don’t want the scales tilted too far to one side that, my life becomes unbalanced so to speak.*

This had been an important reflective tool for Gary over the year, especially when considering whether to live in a remote area. It also reflected his achievement in being able to maintain a good work-life balance throughout the year.

Main interpretation: Professional identity will continue to grow through individual effort and support, especially within the immediate team and setting.
### Table E5

**Vivienne**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>7.5/10</td>
<td>7-8/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Open to possibilities, as well as considering private practice in the long term</td>
<td>Aims to gain a full-time position in current secondment role if possible</td>
<td>Satisfied with current position and considering private practice in the long term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Outgrown current role and ready for something new. Final placement was beneficial and meaningful due to facilitating change with client groups</td>
<td>Entered into a new role that allows for utilising more social work knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Gained permanent position in area of interest. Enjoys being part of a team environment. Achieved growth and development as a result of further experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; employment; personal and professional fit; field placement experiences; knowing/thinking as a social worker</td>
<td>Support and development; lived experience of identity; perceptions of being newly qualified; team culture; practice field transition and adjustment</td>
<td>Support and development; learning; team culture; supervision; employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>Yeah, so that’s why it’s really important to build in, something we were touching on before, the support system. The network system, you know, and having time out</td>
<td>I’m confidently working through the daily tasks and seeing people more, feeling more confident in that role. I’m able to manage virtually all the work that is required of me…</td>
<td>And so my confidence has increased and because I’m within a team environment I feel more supported as I said before and there are others to bounce ideas off and to share information with</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
First interview. Vivienne came to social work with a significant history of practice and study experiences: “...some people call me a perpetual student”. There had always been an interest in understanding others, as well as being within the service professions: “...I wanted something with more depth, I think and understanding about different things, people’s development, my own development...”

Despite this history, Vivienne found it daunting to begin in a new profession as it was unknown as to whether her previous background would be considered by future employers: “I’d like to think those, all those things would be considered in my next role”. Previous experiences, field placement and study contributed greatly to Vivienne’s confidence in her social work identity, as well as personal relationships: “I think they [personal relationships] show that you are capable by what they require of you”.

Her current role was within a government organisation. Vivienne had developed the role for over six years through incorporating her previous study and experiences. At times, the balance between the job boundaries and allowing room to utilise her full skill set needed to be negotiated carefully with managers. There was a delicate balance between her role and professional identity.

Vivienne’s goal was to now gain a full-time position, but living in a rural area posed challenges in the availability of positions. Vivienne was open to future possibilities and was interested in continuing to develop her knowledge and skill base: “I’d like to do short courses in family therapy”.

Vivienne reinforced the importance of professional support mechanisms such as supervision and peer support, as well as engaging in self-care: “...I’m very big on self-care. I learnt many years ago that’s vital. I instil that in the people I work with”. Vivienne emphasised the importance of gaining personal support as part of holistically meeting needs: “I think it’s very important to have some form of support or counselling, or someone that you can talk with, or talk over things with...there are some topics that are probably better discussed by an outsider”.

However, it could be challenging to meet such needs if support and development mechanisms are not embedded into organisational structures. A positive organisational culture characterised by supportive management and leadership were important dimensions to Vivienne’s experiences.
Main interpretation: Previous experience can help development as a social worker but others may still see one as completely new, which may overlook individual nuances.

Second interview. Vivienne was juggling her substantive role with another one when a secondment opportunity opened up for her. It was an exciting opportunity and Vivienne was hoping to move into the secondment role permanently. However, job availability remained a challenge in her local rural area.

Vivienne was satisfied with utilising social work values, knowledge and skill in her work. Her transition and adjustment mostly related to learning a new role, as opposed to seeing herself as a newly qualified social worker.

Due to staff shortages, there were workload challenges in her team but overall the team culture was positive and Vivienne enjoyed learning from others. The workload challenges were partially off-set by management:

“We’ve had quite a significant improvement in terms of systems. We’ve had some changes and new things have been implemented, which is making it easier. And we’ve had the same manager over that time as well, acting manager. So that’s been really good and it’s created more cohesion as well.”

Vivienne was receiving additional support as part of orientation into her new role. This was found to be an important mechanism during her transition and adjustment.

Once again, self-care and support were crucial for Vivienne, as a lot of personal and professional transition and challenges occurred within a short timeframe. Vivienne acknowledged her resilience as a key strength when faced with such issues.

Main interpretation: Despite previous experience, transitioning into a new role can take time and needs to be adequately supported.

Final interview. While several challenges were still a major part of recent experiences, Vivienne had now reached a more settled stage. Vivienne successfully moved into the permanent position she had hoped for throughout the year. A major achievement was transitioning from being a solo practitioner to working within a multidisciplinary team environment: “I think working within a multidisciplinary team has, has been challenging but rewarding because everyone brings their own skills
and knowledge and gifts. I think I’ve had to be very flexible and extend myself more that way…”

It was beneficial to be connected with social workers in the team:

...I think that we have similar values. We wish to empower people, we want to, we want social justice; we want the basic things that represent social work so yeah we have that in common and there is that, is it camaraderie, is that the word?

Vivienne described growth in several areas including use of theory, practice and working with others. Vivienne’s professional development goals included gaining further experience and working towards private practice in the long term: “I’d like to stay and contribute and learn a lot more, gain a lot more experience and, and then apply for my accreditation as a mental health social worker and get my Medicare number and work privately”.

In order to regain balance between work and life, Vivienne had several personal goals. This balance was reinforced in advice Vivienne would give to other newly qualified social workers:

Have a good mentor, get plenty of support and it’s about balance, exercise, eating well, socialising, work within work hours if you can [giggles], it’ll be there tomorrow. And don’t let go of your own values and because they are who you are.

In describing her whole journey, Vivienne used two artefacts, a butterfly and a stress ball. The former represented emerging from a cocoon and being able to spread her wings and fly as a social worker: “I felt very contained and like I had to contain a lot and now I have more autonomy”.

The stress ball represented challenges faced, and the importance of being supported whilst working: “...the stress ball is for those times when I find it challenging that I just hold the ball in one hand and speak or do whatever I have to do or the other”.

These two artefacts capture core dimensions within Vivienne’s journey of growth and development as a social worker. Her experiences were hinged on individual responsibility and systemic support, both of which aided her to flourish.
Main interpretation: The first-year journey can be transformative when one gets to spread their social work wings, but it is important to be proactive about gaining support and organisations must be able to provide it.
Table E6

**Cass**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity scale</td>
<td>4/10</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>8.5/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment goals</td>
<td>Gain permanent position, preferably in current area of health</td>
<td>Gain permanent position when possible</td>
<td>Gain permanent position as soon as possible, open to opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes</td>
<td>Education was transformative, as it opened up a whole new world and stretched her thinking skills</td>
<td>Significant growth and development. Internalised social work identity</td>
<td>Continued growth and development, particularly as a result of a nurturing work environment and individual strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five most prevalent topic codes</td>
<td>Personal growth and development; lived experience of identity; socio-cultural environment; self-concept; transition and adjustment</td>
<td>Support and development; growth and development; personal growth and development; perceptions of perceptions of being newly qualified; supervision</td>
<td>Growth and development; lived experience of identity; learning; being a social worker; personal and professional fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key quotes</td>
<td>I’m faking it until I make it.</td>
<td>It just rolled off the tongue: “Oh I’m a social worker”.</td>
<td>I didn’t expect an entire personal life change and a completely new personal and professional identity.</td>
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</table>

**First interview.** Cass joined social work when a life changing experience with an ill family member sparked an interest in human services work. After diploma study and advice from several sources, Cass undertook social work studies. This was found to be an ideal fit between her personal and professional values. Social work education had a transformative impact by developing Cass’s knowledge, value and skill base.

Cass was working in a government organisation, on a short-term contract. This was her first position in the human services field, and while it was an exciting time, there was mixed emotions about transitioning into the field and her professional identity:
I haven’t worked in the welfare field at all…It is daunting, and you’re not quite sure where or what you’re doing. Or how you’re doing it, or what you’re supposed to be doing, and there’s so many questions sort of floating around and flying out there.

There was a sense of needing to grow and further article what it means to be a social worker. Cass was focused on gaining experience, building her knowledge, and becoming more comfortable with her social work identity. Cass did not see herself having much of a social work identity, when she rated her confidence:

Q. So tell me about a four [out of ten], what does that look like?

A. Tell you a four. Is um, the kind of, not quite there yet (laughs).

Q. Mmhmm.

A. But working towards.

Q. What’s not there?

A. Um, it’s my head, it’s just not there…I’m stopping myself and I don’t know why.

Cass went on to explain that part of this experience was about adjusting to a new profession after many years within a position that she had mastered, as well as adjusting to a team and organisational environment. Cass expressed excitement about the future, particularly, the opportunity for further growth; as experienced during university study. It was believed such opportunities would be influenced by relationships with others, including supervision, and colleagues who supported and validated her work.

Main interpretation: Transition to practice and identity can be a mixed and unsettling experience.

Second interview. After completing her first short-term contract, there was a period of struggling to find another social work position and this greatly impacted Cass’s self-concept and self-esteem. A consistent theme during job seeking was that managers wanted to employ someone with experience. An opportunity arose for a secondment into a job Cass never thought she would be able to do. However, the desire to enter a position compelled Cass to take on the role. Within the first day, Cass knew she
would be able to take on the work; she undertook the role immediately and revelled in having a supportive team environment and quality supervision:

So there’s a beautiful team of four of us and we just have a laugh when things are really awful and tough and difficult and hold each other up and one person will walk through the door and you only have to look at their face and you say turn around and go for a walk, go around the block, go and get a coffee, go and do whatever it is that you need to do and then come back and we’ll talk. And I can ask any questions it’s like having supervision on tap. It’s amazing I can turn around and ask any question at any time.

Cass experienced significant growth and development in her confidence, self-esteem, knowledge, skill and professional identity. Cass found she had settled into her social work identity, which occurred when introducing herself to someone in a social situation:

A: I had the moment.

Q: What was it like?

A: It was amazing actually cause, um, I think I stopped myself and I was thinking about hang on I just said that [I am a social worker] and I actually wasn’t listening to what we were saying [both laugh], hang on social worker, just excuse me...

Q: The mind shifted.

A: It did. It did...

The importance of having nurturing support structures that acknowledged her as being newly qualified, such as within the team, supervision and with peers was strongly reinforced and experienced by Cass. Having autonomy and being trusted and valued for her knowledge, skills and strengths contributed to fostering her professional identity. Cass was positive about the future and remained focused on continued growth and development.

Main interpretation: It can take time to settle into professional identity.

Final interview. The final interview was a continuation of the positive experiences Cass previously described. A significant change related to self-concept and self-
esteem, as Cass had developed an identity characterised by growth and self-belief in her strengths and abilities:

Q: …you used the word confidence – that’s the big thing that’s been growing again over the last six months?

A: *Oh it’s just shooting through the roof – it’s wonderful.*

Q: How did you get to that point?

A: *Experience and having a team – working with a team who is so – I say the word amazing but they are more than amazing – they’re supportive*

This was achieved through meaningful relationships, and her commitment to learning, self-care, gaining experience and taking on a challenging job. Cass achieved a great deal of learning, such as how to be flexible with clients, what it means to be a social worker, and the close relationship between personal and professional aspects of life. The culture within her workplace was embedded in learning, support, nurturing and providing opportunities for Cass to grow. To describe her own development of professional identity during the first 12 months, post-qualification, Cass chose Smurfette, a character from The Smurfs:

...I always wanted to be like Smurfette...Because she was so right. She had all these – this group of – and I must go back and visit the cartoons because I don’t know if my perspective as an adult on her now is the same as when I was a kid but she just always seemed to be in so control of herself and she had all these brothers around her and she was the only girl in the village but she was able to – what’s the word I am trying to think of – not control everyone but establish herself as a female in amongst all of these boys and she had her own Smurfette identity...I’ve always thought of myself as Smurfette and wanting to be like Smurfette.

While her initial transition into the field was bumpy, Cass settled in, became comfortable with her professional identity and developed her confidence and abilities over the course of the year, which can be attributed to her individual effort and consistent support.
Main interpretation: Growth, change and development, both personal and professional, can be integral to the first-year journey and will continue on into the future.
### Table E7

**Claire**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Would like to remain in contract position</td>
<td>Stay in current role for approximately two years</td>
<td>After further reflection, happy to stay in current role for now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Focused on transitioning into new position and building networks</td>
<td>Attained full-time position.</td>
<td>Identity and aspects of practice are better integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Settling into role and developing more confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Dominant discourses; impacts of discourses; beliefs and worldview; lived experience of identity; perceptions of being newly qualified</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; learning; personal and professional fit; being a social worker; confidence</td>
<td>Growth and development; lived experience of identity; confidence; learning; being a social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>Now we’ve gotta, I’ve gotta come up with the goods and...Yeah, it’s not an academic practice anymore, it’s the real thing</td>
<td>I’ve really gained confidence incredibly in the last 6 months. Really, like the first 3 months or so maybe even four was a huge learning curve…</td>
<td>…I think it’s that kind of settled in yourself feeling…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nothing really new but better integrated</td>
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</table>

*First interview.* Claire entered social work after many years in the creative industries of the private sector. Her search for something more meaningful led her to the human services field. Claire’s intention was to enter psychology; however, Claire eventually joined social work and it was found to be an appropriate fit, particularly at this time in her life:

*I guess social work is to me it’s um, the, culmination of life experience as well as what I’ve learned in theory, and so I’m glad I’m coming to it in middle age.*

*There’s no way I could have been a social worker when I was 20.*
At the first interview, Claire was about to begin a short-term contract in a government organisation. It was in a position she completed during a field placement and it was hoped the position would become permanently available.

Claire was focused on contributing productively to her new role and settling into her social work identity: “...I’ve still gotta build a lot of networks...Because up until now, I’ve only been saying to people, ‘I’m a social work student’, so now I have to say, ‘I’m a social worker...’”

Claire described how it was time for the theory (values, beliefs, practice theory, etc.) to be put into practice, as a newly qualified social worker: “...[I’m] a bit scared of um, you know, now it’s all, what do they say, ‘the rubber hits the road’ or whatever”.

There were other potential challenges to address in her new role. For example, whilst the recovery model continues to grow within the health sector, the medical model remains dominant to varying extents. This dominant discourse not only impacts how clients are viewed and treated but also social workers; something Claire previously witnessed during field placement. Another challenge for Claire included moving from the private sector into a government bureaucracy, which would be a new experience. However, for Claire, these challenges were seen as opportunities for being a positive role model for influencing team and organisational culture, embedding creative intervention techniques and implementing a multidimensional approach.

Main interpretation: This is an important time to put ideas about social work identity into practice.

Second interview. Six months later, Claire described a range of challenges, highlights and successes. In relation to the former, several disappointments emerged such as, culture shock, as Claire transitioned and experienced a dominant culture characterised by “you can’t do this” rather than “you can do this”. There were instances of witnessing managers intimidate and abuse their power. Fortunately, Claire had not directly experienced such interactions herself:

_I approach staff and patients the same way, and that is with love and respect, and I’m finding that while I get disappointed in the way people/staff might behave with another staff member or with a patient, I haven’t actually had any negative behaviour toward me._
While the dominant culture was a disappointment, Claire described it was part of her transition and adjustment to the field, and she remained focused on achieving change and being a role model wherever possible. This meant enacting what it means to be a social worker in her interactions with clients and colleagues.

In relation to highlights and successes, Claire described gaining confidence and settling into her social work identity. Her confidence came through actively living up to her values as well as receiving validating feedback from colleagues and clients about her practice. It was also meaningful to maintain connections with social workers through supervision and local networks. Claire played an important role in co-establishing a peer group:

*It’s peer supervision really and we’re all new social workers, so we – I guess we sort of do a similar thing. We bring case studies along – like real ones that we are working with right now and get advice from the others of what else we could do if we are feeling stuck.*

Finally, another important achievement was being able to direct energies appropriately between her personal and professional worlds, which maintained a good balance between work and life.

Main interpretation: One can achieve a lot when self-awareness, and living up to ideals and social work identity.

*Final interview.* Claire described many examples of practice that contributed to achieving a better sense of integration as a social worker. A key experience put professional self-care at the forefront of Claire’s practice. It was a challenging time and Claire was able to meaningfully individualise what self-care meant to her:

*I’ve taken quite a different turn on self-care. I don’t know how to put it except that I’m much more selfish now and self-care was something that I thought I was doing but now I’ve got a different take on it…I’m just really better tuned to what my needs are.*

This learning experience resulted in greater work–life balance and professional satisfaction. It was an ideal example of Claire successfully putting theory (values, beliefs, etc.) into practice and developing her personal style and confidence as a result:
Well, I’m feeling more proud to say I’m a social worker, and I feel very much more able to say – to describe what I do. Also my confidence has grown with so called superiors. Like my manager and our service manager who is the top of [the area] around here – I used to feel – when I was a student I felt intimidated I think by her and some of the [medical professionals], but now I just feel on an equal level, and yeah I feel like I offer a service as valuable as they do.

To describe her journey, Claire brought a dolphin figurine as her artefact: “…he has become the symbol of my social work career…Yeah emotions are the ocean – to me that’s the metaphor and the only way to navigate it is to become a native in that environment…I’m swimming much more strongly”.

Q: Really, a few waves?
A: Oh yeah. I’ve been under a few times and unable to get out.

Q: Stuck in the tube?
A: Still coming up for air.

Q: But you’ve certainly come out as a stronger swimmer?
A: Absolutely and swimming more playfully rather than effort.

Her artefact captured the significant growth and development Claire experienced over the course of the year. Being critically reflective throughout the process was a key part of what it meant to be a social worker during this time of change and development.

Main interpretation: Continued focus and effort will add depth to professional identity.
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<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>8 or 9/10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Maintain current</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>position</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Moved quickly into</td>
<td>Firmer sense of role</td>
<td>Confidence with defining the role and how he fits,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>new full-time</td>
<td>and social work in</td>
<td>including within the team and broader organisational</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>position.</td>
<td>his context</td>
<td>environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Final field placement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>was particularly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>useful for developing</td>
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<td>independence and</td>
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<td>transitioning into the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>field</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent</strong></td>
<td>employment; role and</td>
<td>Identity transition</td>
<td>Dominant perceptions; dominant discourses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>topic codes</strong></td>
<td>duties; multi-</td>
<td>and adjustment;</td>
<td>impacts of dominant discourses;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>disciplinary settings;</td>
<td>expressing identity;</td>
<td>employment; lived experience of identity;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dominant perceptions;</td>
<td>lived experience of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>identity transition</td>
<td>identity;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and adjustment</td>
<td>clarifying distinct</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I mean it’s, yeah, I</td>
<td>I think I still feel</td>
<td>I think I kind of found where I fit into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was lucky that in my</td>
<td>the same way; I just</td>
<td>everything and then now I’ve started to define</td>
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<td></td>
<td>last placement I was</td>
<td>perhaps have a better</td>
<td>where I fit into it all. I think that’s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>quite hands on. So, it</td>
<td>idea of how to do what</td>
<td>probably the big thing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>felt like it was a</td>
<td>I do here. I have a</td>
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<td></td>
<td>good transition I felt</td>
<td>good idea of how</td>
<td></td>
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<td>like I was, I was</td>
<td>to achieve what I would</td>
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<td>brought to</td>
<td>like to achieve and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a point in my last</td>
<td>how to, yeah operate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>placement where I was</td>
<td>as a social worker in</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ready to, to really</td>
<td>this environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>go by myself</td>
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**First interview.** After working in hospitality for some years, the search for a more meaningful vocation, led James to social work. He found social work to be a good fit and appreciated the professional pathways and diverse opportunities that would be available in the profession. During his final field placement, James successfully applied for an internal vacancy within the same organisation. He transitioned into the
position quickly and felt prepared for it through the practical experiences of his final field placement.

James’s role was in an area he intended to be, but his main challenge was adjusting to a full-time position. Until now, James’s working life had consisted of casual and shift work: “But now I’m working full time but I’ve got the kids, but the whole, the thousand hour placement is finished, there’s no more university work. Yet, I don’t have any spare time. I don’t understand”.

Despite this, James was deeply satisfied with his role and looked forward to gaining further experience. At this stage, James said he needed to learn about the organisational system, and gain practical medical knowledge so he could work effectively in a multidisciplinary environment. Much of this need was being met through gaining experience and internal supervision. James reflected on the possibility of other supervision arrangements after allowing some time to develop:

I might look to external supervision later, I think at this stage to have someone who knows [my workplace] and who I can ask questions and, yeah, I think once I become more competent in a couple of years an external supervisor would be a really good idea.

James described having a confident professional identity, particularly as he could see the distinctness of social work and the value the profession could offer to this organisation. Experiencing successful outcomes with service participants contributed to growing his confidence. Being valued by others was another important dimension, particularly as part of complementing the dominant medical model in his organisation. Although, the social work role was not always understood or valued by others: “…if you don’t have a strong identity, our voice won’t be heard, ultimately”.

The importance of constructing and expressing a confident identity was an important part of his individual and team goals.

Main interpretation: It is important to be able to clearly express a distinct professional social work identity in a multidisciplinary workplace.

Second interview. Six months later, James had continued to grow his knowledge, skill and experience base. He had become more familiar with the organisational environment, the practicalities of his position and increasingly confident in the
distinct identity of social work within his area. James emphasised, learning would be an ongoing experience:

Yeah it’s been quite a journey so far and I’ve learnt an enormous amount and I’ll continue to learn. But the way that I approach things, the way that I think about these things is certainly a part of that learning process.

During this period, James reflected on how prepared he was for practice. In general, he believed his education appropriately socialised him into the being, knowing/thinking and doing base of social work. It understandably did not fully prepare him for a specific medical environment. A commitment to lifelong learning allowed him to transition, gain experience and develop:

Q: …is it fair to say though that the uni still prepared you for the skills for you to be able to then go and negotiate and learn about that environment?

A: Yes, as long as you’ve come with an open mind and want to learn, yeah as long as you come here wanting to continue your learning journey.

Another key dimension to his experiences was supportive relationships, such as the social work team, discharge planner, allied health team and managers. These meaningful relationships allowed for connectedness through like-mindedness, and learning and reflection, much of which was similar to the processes of supervision:

Yeah [we] talk about the day and what’s going on, and ask for opinions on it and what to do next and how to deal with the case. And our managers are very – they encourage us to see them throughout the day with any questions or guidance.

Such relationships contributed to fostering James’s social work identity by further articulating and expressing his professional identity.

Main interpretation: Over time clarity about the distinct aspects of social work identity will emerge.

*Final interview.* James continued on a positive trajectory and experienced several key achievements, including: fully adapting to the new nine to five structure of his role; developing a meaningful self-care approach; building confidence to work effectively with diverse colleagues; and defining his role to achieve a sustainable workload:
I suppose when you first start any job you put on all the airs and graces and you’re polite to everyone and try and be quiet and only speak when spoken to and because it’s the way of a new job. I’ve always been like that but as time goes on, you learn how to deal with particular people and you learn the processes.

Once again, the supportive team environment and co-workers were a part of achieving these goals. James’s professional identity had grown and become more consolidated: “Oh, probably the sense of being able to more define what social work does and more shape it in consultation with the people that I work with”.

James was able to refine the boundaries of his role and maintain these within the multidisciplinary setting. He realised it took time to process and articulate what the social work role was and set up those boundaries with colleagues.

When reflecting on his whole journey, James drew from a poster kept above his desk that contains a key quote from Dr Seuss’s The Lorax:

A: Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not…I’ve always felt that I need to go and help people and to assist and empower people but unless you do something about it and being a social worker is my way of doing something about it.

Q: So how do you feel that fits into your first year then?

A: I think I’ve been able to do something about it…I’ve had some really good outcomes.

The quote captured how James was able to live up to his social work ideals but also that it took time to get there, because he needed to transition and adjust to practice and professional identity.

Main interpretation: It can take time, experience, effort and support to transition and develop professional identity throughout the first year.
### Table E9

**Damon**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>4 or 5/10</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Interested in hospital social work or youth mental health (short-term and/or crisis work)</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Stay within new role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Focused on job-seeking and consolidating preferences and interests</td>
<td>Developed job-seeking skills and positivity around experiences</td>
<td>Employed in an area of interest. Focused on settling in, gaining experience and developing personal style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; employment; personal and professional fit; learning; perceptions of professionalism</td>
<td>Learning; employment; growth and development; job-seeking experiences; confidence</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; employment; learning; support and development; being a social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I just feel like… I’d be super happy if I had [a] social work job, that was going well. Obviously [you] have good and bad days that’s just life. But um, I’ve got that working, got good supervision, feel like I’m building my skills. Like I just don’t feel like I’m building my skills the moment…</td>
<td>I’ve just been stalled in that I haven’t got a social work title job, but I can’t really complain – work hasn’t been too hard and just hanging around and playing footy. Those interviews have been really good just to reflect upon on how I did and so it hasn’t been too much progress work wise, but yeah but if these interviews get me something like a good decent job then it will be worth it</td>
<td>Once I got the job it was good. I guess just sort of finding out what works for me a bit more. Like in sessions, like obviously everyone’s a bit different so not everything’s going to work the same. But I guess just trying to see where I fit in the scheme of things…</td>
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</table>
First interview. After finishing high school, Damon weighed a few options before entering social work. He was drawn to the profession because of human rights and social justice topics he studied at school, as well as diverse career opportunities available in social work.

Damon was actively looking, as well as struggling to find a position that would fully utilise his social work degree: “Yeah pretty much I guess the main thing is um just I’ve been struggling to find um like a sort of social work job...They’re [employers] just very sort of, oh we’re going for people with experience”.

These challenging experiences led to stress and uncertainty, as well as surprise as these potential difficulties were not raised during his studies. Damon was focused on maintaining his motivation during the job-seeking process and looking for positions in a range of geographical locations. Damon’s longer-term goals included earning a sufficient wage and travelling overseas to do social work in another country.

Originally, it was hoped his current position would be a stepping stone into an appropriate role. However, it offered few opportunities for progression. Damon could see how aspects of his degree could be utilised in his current role but he was concerned about stalling:

> It’s a bit hard like, I think if I stayed in the job a bit longer I will have to look at external supervision, just so I don’t get a bit rusty, cause like even now it’s just sort of trying to think like okay, where’s it at? How am I actually using my degree?

Some positives included learning about job seeking, his strengths, and professional needs. At this point, Damon’s professional identity was fostered through experiences and learning from field placement, as well as finding a good fit with social work, particularly in terms of work–life balance:

> ... I’m pretty happy at sort of where I’m at in knowing, here’s my job and here’s what I do there, and here’s the me out of it...which is really important to me at the moment just because I’m, still growing as a person and what not...

He was motivated to reflect on what social work means to him, especially notions of professionalism, and how this fits with his personal life as a maturing young adult.
Main interpretation: There can be some unexpected experiences when entering the field such as challenges with job seeking.

Second interview. Six months later, Damon was still applying for social work-based positions. There was a point he considered having a break; however, some support and a good outcome in a job interview encouraged him to continue. While it remained a struggle to gain a position, Damon felt more positive overall and was learning more about job-seeking: “Yeah, [I’m] carrying myself more confident in interviews now. I guess it just comes with experience”.

Damon described personal and professional growth, including becoming more confident and comfortable with his interests, strengths and personal style:

“I would probably say a 6 [identity scale] because I am feeling positive but just that I haven’t really had too much experience to see if it carries over into actually working out. So I’ve got an idea of where I’m at but just not knowing if it’s going to work in practice.

Damon had the image of social work in his mind but needed the opportunity to consolidate it in reality. Finally, maintaining a meaningful balance between professional and personal interests remained an important part of his growth and development. Two days after our interview, Damon emailed that he was successful in gaining a full-time position in an area of interest.

Main interpretation: Gaining experience and support can be important for development, including for job seeking and consolidating professional identity.

Final interview. At this point, Damon had been in his new position for nearly six months. He was focused on settling into his role, developing his personal social work style, and adjusting to a new town: “So ‘busy’ would be the word and trying to figure out a new role and put all the social work stuff into play and I guess just settling into a new town as well is a big thing”.

Within his immediate workplace, Damon was the only social worker, and it had been interesting and useful to observe the styles of other practitioners, especially psychologists: “...when they talk about all the issues coming out, they’re all looking for a diagnosis and I was more about okay, so what’s important to them? What do they think’s going on, how does it get fixed?”
This had helped Damon to develop his personal style, but he remained conscious of possible enculturation into the dominant culture around diagnosing. He recognised the need to continue working on confidence in his own approach, as part of fostering his social work identity. This goal was supported by his manager who encouraged him to bring his social work skill set to his position.

Damon’s artefact was the comic character, Night-Wing, from the *Batman* series, who represented commitment and helping qualities:

*I think it’s the only character that – not only, but one of the only ones that have sort of gone from, that changes in comics. Most of them stay the same, they never grow up. Where he’s gone from a kid to an adult and just that sort of – yeah just that sort of, I don’t know if it’s a transformation but it’s like this isn’t working for me anymore, I’m going to do this*

The character also reflected the experience of change, growth and development, which is similar to Damon’s journey across the whole year.

Main interpretation: It is important to clarify a distinct professional identity, and through individual effort and support this can be achieved, as well as developing a personal style as confidence is gained.
Table E10
Rueben

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<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>7/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Staying in current role, remains open to other opportunities</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Study helped with growth and evolution of professional identity</td>
<td>Going well and focused on working effectively within dominant discourses</td>
<td>Continues to learn and remains focused on growth and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; support and development; being a social worker; beliefs and worldview; supervision</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; learning; meaningful relationships; support and development; being a social worker</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; dominant discourses; impacts of dominant discourses; learning; meaningful relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>So I think just getting that supportive environment. To be able to foster yourself, and also to keep up to date with the current, social work values. And also keeping up to date with reading, because we have attained the qualification. And we’ve done the four years but we now need to consolidate all those four years now</td>
<td>As a social worker I would probably say yeah it hasn’t been any different, only say for these few pockets where there are challenges where I really need to be really saying okay how do I make things happen, but I would say yeah there hasn’t been any different particularly to those cases that everything is flowing smoothly</td>
<td>But I think now given the experience and [being] given some feedback from my manager and also having the interaction with other social workers informally, has been very helpful</td>
</tr>
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First interview. Ruben entered social work as a mature-aged student after working within the policing sector in another country. After moving to Australia, he explored several study options to continue with his lifelong interest of working with people. Advice from a supportive teacher at TAFE led Rueben to embark on a higher education track where he gained a series of qualifications. These achievements eventually prompted Rueben to study social work. The profession was found to be an ideal value fit, as well as an avenue for developing appropriate professional knowledge and skill that could be used effectively:

... [benefits of study] now I’m realising let’s take it from half-full glass instead of half empty so we can just help and we can just facilitate people to be able to do things on their own and they can stand on their own.

During some of his study, Rueben worked in a government organisation. While the balance between study and work could be challenging, it was positive, as he could connect theory and practice more readily. Over time, Rueben gained further positions within the same organisation, one being his substantive role and another a secondment. The latter came at a request from a manager and even though Rueben had intended to only do his substantive role, the secondment became a great opportunity: “I think this was a blessing in disguise, because I’m really enjoying [it], I like the clinical aspect of it, and having dual supervision as well”.

Rueben’s social work identity had come a long way as a result of his education, as well as professional experience, support (personal and professional), seeing successful outcomes with service participants and receiving positive feedback from various sources. At this point, Rueben was interested in clarifying what it means to be a social worker now that he had the qualification, and developing connections with other social workers, particularly for further feedback to validate his social work practice. Despite supportive informal connections with some social workers and an excellent supervisor, Rueben was considering accessing external social work supervision, as part of gaining feedback.

Main interpretation: This is an important time to build on prior experience and consolidate what the social work qualification now means for professional identity.

Second interview. Rueben remained focused on building his knowledge, skill and social work identity, including how to best enact professional values when
surrounded by contrasting discourses. An experience with a family was an ideal example of how Rueben achieved this by balancing a range of views and interests, including the family, team members and management. While it was challenging, it was also exciting as Rueben experienced growth and development, especially confidence in what it means to be a social worker. He was able to maintain a rapport with the family and balance complexities earlier than expected:

_I mean obviously I would say I’m still a baby with social worker so I thought maybe along the line these complex cases would probably come to me as I develop the confidence and as I develop the experience but to me it was a bit of an early shower for me. I expected these challenges probably to come down the line._

Rueben’s professional identity continued to be influenced by support, successful outcomes and validating feedback. Gaining experience while maintaining openness to learning was also reinforced: “...so yeah I guess, I would say now I’m now much more confident obviously working with families and advocating for them but yeah there’s still heaps to learn”.

Only one of his roles included clinical and administrative supervision, which could be difficult when faced with ethical conflicts and difficult decision-making in the other. Rueben sought advice and support from other social workers as part of bridging this issue, as well as for developing his connectedness to social workers, which was an ongoing goal. Rueben explored the option of external supervision but was not supported by his manager to do so at this stage.

Main interpretation: Identity can be fostered through articulating where one stands as a social worker, self-awareness about applying theory to practice, being open to learning and having broader support and validation.

_Final interview._ Rueben continued to achieve successful outcomes that contributed to his learning and development. These successes were shared with colleagues through case presentations which further validated Rueben’s practice. Relationships with colleagues, managers and social workers remained core to Rueben. He focused on maintaining a productive relationship with his manager in light of dominant discourses that can influence decision-making:
...I’ve sort of gained in confidence to express myself to my manager in a way that is very respectful. And I think she’s also confident in my practice because I’ve always said “If there’s anything that you really feel I need to improve, I’m happy to learn, I’m still learning.

Over the year, Rueben was keen to have meaningful relationships by developing connections with social workers. This was achieved through developing his informal networks, as well as undertaking casual teaching. Rueben was able to connect with colleagues, and become immersed in social work through the teaching experience: “So I guess all those connections has always been, yeah sort of reminding me of my identity as a social worker and how I can foster my social work values”.

Finally, Rueben’s artefact was a picture representing his journey and relationships:

I have chosen this one specifically to illustrate my journey as new grad social workers that you will never walk alone in the long journey. Also, within the journey, I was expected to do different tasks all at once which drew on my multi-tasking skills, time management and attention to detail. Although the journey appeared overwhelming and difficult at first, it was made possible through collaboration with others and most importantly willingness to being part of a multidisciplinary team.

A major learning experience that Rueben achieved over time was being able to better articulate what it means to be a social worker, since gaining the qualification. Through experience, reflection and support Rueben was able to develop his confidence and express his social work ideals.

Main interpretation: One should not travel alone on the first-year journey.
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<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity scale</td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>4/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment goals</td>
<td>Satisfied with new position and would like to move into a counselling position in a couple of years</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes</td>
<td>Growth and development within new role, particularly through positive interactions with social workers who model and positively challenge her work</td>
<td>Continues to grow and develop through supervision, professional development and role models, as well as critical reflection and active learning</td>
<td>Achieved great strides but realises there is always much more to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five most prevalent topic codes</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; social work mindset; knowing/thinking as a social worker; personal and professional fit; doing as a social worker</td>
<td>Perceptions of being newly qualified; growth and development; learning; support and development; expressing identity</td>
<td>Growth and development; organisational culture; live meaning of identity; practice-field transition and adjustment; support and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key quotes</td>
<td>Everything’s aligned. Yeah. And I bounce from that alignment, it’s almost like I’m sitting here and its foundation blocks. Yeah, so it’s, I’ve finally put the last brick in</td>
<td>Yeah I have actually I’m probably more days where I’m the poor little duck going like 100 mph but I’ve had days where I’m kind of swimming and I’m lying on my back looking at the sun, looking at the sky and the water so that’s been nice. I have made progress so I really want to give myself more of that…</td>
<td>Because again it goes back to that – well I’ve realised I need more depth to my knowledge; I realised to be a good advocate you need to know your stuff</td>
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</table>
First interview. An important experience with a close friend who became ill facilitated Julia’s move into social work as a mature-aged student: “It was a growing feeling, it was something almost like seeds were planted and it grew over time, to help people”.

After completing her studies, Julia gained a position with a local feminist organisation. Julia described a meaningful moment when offered the position by her manager: “And her last words to me, Bernie, were [Julia]: ‘Welcome to your social work career.’ And I just went, ‘thank you...’ So that completion, that sort of tied in there, it’s been a really long time”.

The conversation was a marker of Julia’s personal and professional journey whilst transitioning into practice. It also validated her as a social worker, acknowledging the transition from student to practitioner.

The organisational culture was a major contributor to Julia’s experiences and development. A particular highlight was being surrounded by inspirational social workers, who were role models for Julia and lived experience of identity:

A: ...so modelling wasn’t something that I’d actually thought about until probably three months ago, four months ago.

Q: As being important do you mean?

A: Yeah. And as being part of the key to maintaining my social work identity and developing my practice.

Such a nurturing and inspirational environment was conducive to learning and working towards her goals: “Like, they live, they live their practice. They, and it just comes out in them. I want people to know the same about me”.

For Julia, this reflected the close relationship between personal and professional dimensions.

Julia described her identity development as a balance between achieving great strides and being a work-in-progress: “A five is an exciting place because it means you’ve progressed somewhat...But, how lovely I’ve got somewhere to go”.
It was anticipated further development would be achieved through individual and social means such as supervision, gaining experience in the field and continuing to actively reflect and learn:

*I’m a really good learner, like I pick things. I’m not academic by any stretch, but I try really hard and I’m motivated to learn and to be better. So I think that five has come from me, yeah my motivation to be a five to be somewhere...*

Julia was hopeful her practice would become more intuitive in the future: “...but I’m in a real learning phase... And applying what I’ve learnt... So you know, I’m like the, the proverbial duck [duck noise] ...Going like hell under that water, Bernie”.

This reflected Julia’s focus on articulating what it means to be a social worker and working towards consolidating her professional identity.

Main interpretation: One is a learner as a newly qualified social worker, and this journey requires individual focus and social support.

Second interview. Six months later, Julia had experienced significant growth and development, including confidence in her professional identity. The organisational context remained a vital facilitator of learning and change:

*I’ve had to stretch and grow every minute of every day... There is no sort of cruise along; they have a very high standard, so to come in as a new prac worker you’re almost like a possum in headlights.*

Importantly, Julia was encouraged to embrace and express her professional social work identity. Julia emphasised the aspirational approach of the CEO, who fostered a nurturing environment through keen awareness of organisational, team and individual needs:

*...[she] knows that I will sit at my desk and not move and eat my lunch there and so she just doesn't allow that to happen but she knows other practitioners are not like that they have different requirements for support from her and stuff so, not that she needs to manage me at all, she doesn’t but she knows what we’re like as individuals.*

While Julia was extremely satisfied with her organisation and job, there were moments of exhaustion and doubt because of the stressful nature of her work and
wanting to meet the high standard of specialist practice in her organisation. Julia came to realise that being newly qualified meant learning all over again. Relevant support was provided and Julia was proactive about pursing her needs with colleagues, supervisors and management.

Main interpretation: The journey of learning and growth continues well after completing university.

Final interview. Julia’s journey continued in a positive direction:

*I just never anticipated how good it would feel but in saying that there have still been challenges in terms of my social work identity and holding my position within that but it’s not so hard though in an organisation that values social work so heavily.*

Several challenges related to managing team dynamics, organisational change, maintaining self-care and developing her practice: “I’m still learning my theories and I’m still understanding them and I’m still integrating them into my practice so I want to run before I can walk”.

Many of these dimensions reflected the experience of transition and adjustment to the practice environment. Progress had been made in all areas and Julia noticed her confidence had grown as a result: “Whereas you know before I would have my opinions but I feel more confident to express them I think now”.

The change in her professional identity scale was related to the positive realisation, there is so much more to learn:

*There’s so much to learn and it’s – every time I learn something Bernie I realise how much I don’t know...that’s great. It makes me want to know more. I’m not daunted by that, I’m actually inspired by it...I’m probably sitting at a 4 because my confidence whilst it is better it – and if I had my time again I wouldn’t set me at a 6, I’d set me lower, so I think a 4 is a good place.*

When reflecting on her whole journey, Julia emphasised several key dimensions to her experiences: “…one thing this year has shown me what I am strong at, and what I’m not so strong at”; “…yes, I think the biggest thing for me has been a safe place to learn, that’s huge”; “So I just think I’d just tell a new grad just believe in yourself but
be open to learning more and being challenged, yeah and it’s only the beginning, that’s the biggest thing, it’s only the beginning”.

Here she emphasised her growth, gaining more self-awareness, embracing challenges and the fundamental importance of a supportive environment.

Main interpretation: The first year is an important journey for self-discovery and development.
**Table E12**

*Nina*

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<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>6.5/10</td>
<td>7/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Satisfied with gaining permanent position in current organisation.</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Yes and interested in a clinical position and developing a program in an area of interest, if the possibility arises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Field placement was particularly useful for bridging theory and practice</td>
<td>Gaining confidence and remains excited about learning something new every day</td>
<td>Continued on a positive path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; social work versus psychology; being a social worker; employment; field placement experiences</td>
<td>Growth and development; managers; perceptions of being newly qualified; lived experience of identity; learning</td>
<td>Perceptions of being newly qualified; growth and development; personal growth and development; confidence; strengths and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I feel like I have an idea of what social work is, I feel like I have an idea of how I would like to be a social worker, I just don’t feel like I’ve had an opportunity yet to fully do that. And I’m sort of really excited about starting full time and having a really large client load</td>
<td>I think – okay, so when I had my three-month review after I started working full time and that’s the first time that my boss had said: “Oh, you can tell you’re a social worker” – I think that was it when I thought to myself, okay, well I think what I am doing is really social worker based</td>
<td>I think my confidence has grown and that’s really important to me because I'm the sort of person that is cautious</td>
</tr>
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</table>
First interview. After re-assessing career options, Nina joined social work as a mature-aged student. Her personal background contributed to an interest in the human services sector, particularly the positive influence of her mother: “Mum is a really caring person, so she always sort of wants to stick up for the underdog and things like that...So I think that I got some of my attitudes from that”.

Nina transitioned from her final placement in youth mental health, into a position with the same agency. Management cited Nina’s ability to work well with clients and colleagues contributed to offering her a job straight out of university. Nina described her transition into practice as follows: “I’m not a huge fan of change, hence the reason why I stay in jobs for like seven years at a time...so, it was sort of a really big transition for me”.

Overall, Nina was excited to finish and move forward with her degree.

During field placement, appropriate support and scaffolded learning opportunities contributed greatly to becoming an independent practitioner. These factors were also a crucial part of being newly qualified. The team culture was positive and an interesting dynamic included how social work and psychology colleagues related to each other, based on their discipline background:

> And so she’s working in an office with psychologists and social workers, and often she’ll have, you know, like a diagram of this person’s life and who their support systems are and all that, and she’ll say can you just look at this for me with some social work eyes and give me some more ideas?

These interactions were useful for Nina to reflect on what it means to be a social worker in her context, and consolidating a distinct professional identity. A sense of like-mindedness was formed with other social workers in her organisation and beyond, such as university friends. Nina was looking forward to more time and experience within her position in order to develop, as well as beginning supervision to work on practice goals.

Main interpretation: Time and gaining experience can be an important part of fostering confidence and professional identity.
Second interview. Through gaining experience, meeting professional needs, active learning, and professional relationships, Nina’s confidence and personal style had grown:

*I think you definitely finish uni and you think to yourself I still have got no idea what I am doing. I have got no idea how to be a social worker – I have got no idea what I am doing and I feel like in this role I have got a better idea of how to be a social worker.*

Nina continued to reflect on what it means to be a social worker in her multi-disciplinary environment. The perceptions of others played an important role in this process: “Well, they just sort of say... ‘Oh you can tell you’re a social worker by doing that and things like that’.”

These exchanges helped Nina consolidate her distinct professional identity. A particularly important relationship within this environment was her manager who provided a lot of support and validated her professional identity. Being recognised and valued as a social worker was important to Nina, as well as balancing her role and professional identity:

*Well, I guess when I first started working, because my role wasn’t a social worker role, I didn’t know how that would fit into the case worker part of things. Like how could I be a social worker within that role, and I think I have been able to find a pretty good balance of that.*

Nina wanted to integrate these experiences and build on them in the future: “*Well, I think now, I think I need to have more faith in my skills*”.

While others had faith in her, Nina wanted to develop more confidence through self-belief.

Main interpretation: Professional identity evolves over time, especially through the everyday interactions one has with others, especially colleagues.

Final interview. Six months later, Nina had continued to grow, particularly in terms of confidence: “...so I’ve been a lot more confident in referral pathways and things like that...”; “I think another thing I’ve increased my confidence with is being very specific about what I can offer and what I can’t offer”.

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...because he [manager] is so approachable that I’m now getting the confidence to not have to approach him as much. I guess just always knowing, I can if I need to but then having a little bit more confidence in my own knowledge and putting my faith in myself a little bit more.

Gaining self-belief had improved, and her personal style was developing. Nina described her first year as ideal:

*I have never gone home from work stressed about anything to do with me professionally. Of course, sometimes things with clients are stressful and you have good days and bad days at work, but I’ve never gone home thinking, oh, I don’t know if I like this job anymore; so yeah, no I couldn’t have asked for a better first year.*

A major contributor to this experience was the support provided by management:

*I don’t think my role would be as enjoyable as it is if I didn’t have free reign of contact with my manager and clinical leader, I need that. Probably not every day, probably not every second day, but when you need it you need it right then.*

A meaningful artefact was a present from university friends. The item is now on her office desk and colleagues comment on it:

*...I don’t just glance at it and keep going, every time I see it, it reminds me of that [time] and so obviously uni was very important to me, so I love reminders of Uni, I love it...it was part of my learning at uni, and now it's part of my learning at work, almost.*

The artefact represents relationships and her transition from university, into the field. It is a reminder how the meaningful journey of her education, how far she had come and her new life of learning and relationships.

Main interpretation: It takes time to develop a personal style, but being committed to learning and having access to adequate support will help along the way.
### Table E13

**Chelsea**

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<th>First Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>7-8/10</td>
<td>7-8/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>New position is a stepping stone towards other work down the track</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Wants to move on and expand skill set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Confidence has grown due to fulfilling a range of personal and professional goals, as well as gaining experience in practice</td>
<td>Developing understanding of how to deal with organisational culture. Growth and development achieved through post-graduate study and research activities</td>
<td>Study and research continues to contribute to growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open to future career possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Growth and development; meaningful relationships; support and development; lived experience of identity; personal growth and development</td>
<td>Socio-cultural environment; personal and professional fit; growth and development; managers; organisational culture</td>
<td>Managers; support and development; employment; bullying experiences; growth and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I suppose in terms of why it [identity] would be a seven is more because I’ve done it and I know I can do it, and to see what I was like in February compared to what I am. Like I can see the growth.</td>
<td>I can see my social work development in the six months and I can also see how much more grounded I am with those three areas [work, academic and social life] … not that I didn’t know who I was beforehand, but I’ve “solidated” that, I suppose</td>
<td>I can see that I have grown. I probably hadn’t thought about it until today because I just keep doing what I do. But I can see – and I can see why my excitement that the research is where I’m growing rather than work, which is… It is paying off and I can see it – I can see possibilities</td>
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First interview. Chelsea came to social work with a long-term interest in service professions. Her life experiences led her to valuing the journey of others and wanting to be part of something meaningful. Through this and study Chelsea had gained an important foundation she could grow from, as key personal and professional goals had been fulfilled at this point of her life: “...all the jigsaw pieces are falling together”.

Not long after completing university study, Chelsea gained a position with a local non-government organisation. The role provided exciting opportunities that would be a foundation for her development. Chelsea found that funding requirements placed tight boundaries on role definition and the social work skills she could utilise. In other words, there was no room for multidimensional work at meso and macro levels. Chelsea reflected on how to balance this role with her social work identity. Her main goal was to become more oriented with her organisational and community context.

The differences between field placement and work were also found to be interesting: “I know prac is completely different to the workforce, but I kind of assumed that there would be some element of supervision”.

Chelsea experienced little opportunity to discuss and reflect on social work practice with colleagues and management: “...I suppose I’ve always taken challenges in my stride. And I, like I do still think about the, theoretical stuff but not necessarily in a, vocal way”; “…because I’m just used, I suppose I’m used to having social workers just to bounce ideas off”.

Chelsea saw that this lack of support could be partially offset through postgraduate study next year. It was anticipated that further study would allow her to remain connected to a social work identity, as well as ongoing growth and development. Chelsea was conscious about reflecting on theory and practice and connected with a previous supervisor and other personal and professional relationships that provided support. The organisational culture remained an ongoing area of concern that would require monitoring. Still, Chelsea was excited about her achievements, including significant growth over the last several years, and since gaining a position. She was looking forward to lifelong learning and development.
Main interpretation: Finishing university can be an important achievement both personally and professionally.

Second interview. As suspected, postgraduate study and research activities with social workers, contributed positively to Chelsea’s professional identity over the last six months: “I suppose they have shaped the way I think and the way I even act, more so, in the workplace as well”.

I’ve learnt so much more in the last six months... I suppose broaden, and then me becoming more aware of like where I fit – well no, where I fit is not the right word – like what I, what theories I like to use the most and why I like to use them...

Personal and professional relationships remained a crucial part of Chelsea’s support and development experiences, as well as maintaining balance between work, life and study.

The organisational culture contained tensions, as there was little recognition of the full scope of knowledge and skill practitioners could bring to their roles. Instead, micro-management was a common experience which impacted service delivery. A major learning experience for Chelsea was understanding the organisational culture and how to survive and thrive inside, as well as beyond, through study and research.

Main interpretation: Negative management behaviours can impact work, but remaining connected to a social work environment and further learning can be of great benefit.

Final interview. Chelsea continued to grow and develop through study and research activities, and a sense of meaningful purpose through being a change agent:

Well, I suppose I enjoy it because it’s not only growing me but it’s, by writing stuff and researching stuff, you’re opening I suppose for want of a better word eyes of potentially other people or other social workers and then they go oh, yeah maybe.

These changes led Chelsea to become open about unexpected future possibilities: “I’m more open now than what I was 12 months ago”. In practice, Chelsea reflected on the impacts of negative perceptions within the sector and her organisation. In her work setting, these issues included being micromanaged to the point of bullying. At
no stage had Chelsea been asked what her professional needs and capacities were. Chelsea reflected on reaching the limits of what can be achieved in her role: “I’m still doing social work at work but I’m not growing at work. I’m no longer growing at work so it doesn’t add to it [confidence in social work identity]”.

Chelsea aimed to move into a new position that would provide meaningful support and opportunities, especially ones that would challenge her to grow:

[To grow] Probably a new job with some, I’m going to say development opportunities, but basically more room to grow, more room for me to actually be not a proper social worker, but to use more of my skill set rather than this much of this much, which most days it is.

Chelsea was realistic that challenges would exist in any organisational setting and it was important to be prepared for such realities, as well as being determined to manage difficulties.

Main interpretation: The first-year journey can be transformative when one is engaged in meaningful social work activities and bringing about change.
### Table E14

**Maggie**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity scale</td>
<td>3/10</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>I don’t have an identity – I really don’t [Pause] because I’ve never practised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment goals</td>
<td>Would consider a social work role at current organisation but most interested in health</td>
<td>Uncertain of future but remains interested in health</td>
<td>Working towards new profession, social work useful and is open to future possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes</td>
<td>Final placement contributed to personal and professional growth. Unsettled about transition and unsure as to why</td>
<td>Resigned from organisation. Identity eroded further due to bullying and organisational issues</td>
<td>Returned to university study in nursing. Much happier but some sadness and anger remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five most prevalent topic codes</td>
<td>Lived experience of identity; being a social worker; role identity versus social work identity; transition and adjustment into practice; expressing identity</td>
<td>Burnout experiences; erosion of identity; employment; personal and professional fit; lived experience of identity</td>
<td>Expressing identity; personal growth and development; self-concept; socio-cultural environment; good fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key quotes</td>
<td>I can’t express my identity, I can’t tweak it, I can’t use it, I’m wearing a different mask.</td>
<td>The path post-graduation is not always well paved even if you have good intentions.</td>
<td>I can’t say I will close the door forever and forget my studies and I’m still fighting with that. You know I have studied for so long and get to the end point and never use it. [Pause] So for the time being I can’t do social work.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>I feel that I need to be in a position where I can say yes I’m [Maggie], hello I’m a social worker.</td>
<td>I’m pretty much bitter and twisted and I haven’t had a day in social work, so I’m behind the 8 ball in that regard.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I felt like I was in kindergarten because I’m a new</td>
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</table>
First Interview

grad and now I’ve even gone, I’ve repeated a year almost because I’m now unemployed and not in the network

First interview. Maggie completed her social work studies as a mature-aged student and while working in the public service. A range of personal and professional influences led to social work, including diverse career options, influential personal and professional relationships, a drive to achieve something significant, and a desire to be within a service profession.

Maggie was in a role she described as “being-a-pseudo-social worker”. Many of her duties utilised professional knowledge and skills but it was not a social work position: “...it’s very hard because you have that training, you have the capacity to do it, but you have to leave that knowledge at the door”.

Maggie believed her professional identity could not grow as she had not been released from the starting blocks yet. She had an idea of the kind of social worker she wanted to be but could not fully realise yet. Maggie also felt unsettled at this point because the transition was not what she anticipated: “It doesn’t feel real yet and I don’t know why”.

It was hoped that receiving her testamur and gaining a social work-based position would make a difference.

Maggie emphasised several important elements to transitioning into the professional realm:

You might have a year or maybe two years out, but you’ve got to get out there and start using it [the degree]. Networking it, as we were talking at dinner you know about the communities, about the um, like the networks. Social work is really a small [profession] ... And you’ve gotta get your name and your reputation...
Following from this, connections with social workers in her organisation were valuable: “...so it’s nice to be with someone, to talk to people who are on the same wavelength”.

There were opportunities to identify with like-minded professionals, build her own identity, and consider styles of practice through observation. Maggie believed this would mean more when she would be in a social work position herself.

Main interpretation: The transition period can be mixed and identity can be strongly tied to gaining an appropriate role that fully utilises a social workers’ abilities.

Second interview. Maggie experienced the previous six months as significantly negative in terms of job seeking and bullying from a social work manager. Maggie came to feel like a number rather than a valued person within her organisation:

I feel like a dog’s body, as a worker so they identified me as another person to serve a customer, another bum on the seat rather than social worker identity and I felt like they’ve led me on to believe that there will be a social work position in order for me to stay there...

Maggie was now questioning whether to leave the profession entirely:

The experience I’ve had over the last six months with my current line manager, who is also a social worker, has really polarised me and made me question: “Oh my gosh have I chosen the right profession?” based on how this person has treated me, the way she interacts with clients, how she manages me...

Maggie had actively worked to address these issues with the manager but the bullying continued. Her professional identity had eroded and Maggie described she was only a social worker on paper. Despite this, Maggie maintained a glimmer of hope as she was moving to another city due to the work of her partner. It was scary to be entering unknown territory and to go from being a worker to unemployed, but for the immediate future, Maggie was focused on self-care and a sense of possibility:

A: … I need to re-energise myself and maybe this is a blessing in disguise.

Q: What do you mean?
A: Meaning that by resigning and leaving and going into the unknown it might be better for me.

Main interpretation: Challenges with job opportunities, bullying and being dehumanised can erode professional identity.

Final interview. After taking some time for relaxation and processing her emotions, Maggie made the decision to leave social work and return to university study in nursing. The major contributor to this decision was how Maggie was treated by her former organisation:

If I was working at Coles for all my degree; finally graduated – this piece of paper I’ve been wanting; I’ll be out there getting myself involved in everything but because I was working so much aligned with social work – I was doing social work but never recognised as social work and being led down the garden path to “Oh we’re going to offer this position”; we value you only to be spat out at the end of it...

Maggie had come a long way over the last six months and was much happier, but she described a sense of grief and loss when reflecting on previous study and no longer being in the profession:

...for social work – I really wanted to do it – really truly and honestly but I felt that my organisation (one) just the volume and the complexity of people and needing to be like case management and not recognised as such just wore me out...

In her current study, Maggie found she was not completely divorced from social work as the knowledge, skills and values of the profession could be utilised. Even though Maggie did not express a social work identity, there were elements that remained and the possibility of returning to social work was left open: “…I can’t call myself a social worker – I don’t have that identity in that sense because I don’t practise it but I can definitely take aspects of what I’ve learnt”.

To describe her journey, Maggie’s artefact was a rock:

...it’s hard like me – it’s weathered the storm. As you can see it’s got blemishes or discolouration so it’s sort of weathered...Yes it’s hard as a rock but there are battle scars but it’s still smooth...Smoothed out – everything has just
washed over it and that’s how I’m going to take things – just go with the flow – if you can survive what you’ve done everything is fine.

Her artefact reflected the unexpected journey Maggie went on. She never anticipated her first-year post-qualification would unfold in such a way. Being bullied impacted her self-concept but she has managed to personally grow from those experiences, and Maggie believed she will continue to do so in the future.

Main interpretation: The first-year journey can include some very harsh unexpected experiences and outcomes, especially from the organisational context and managers.
### Jessica

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Identity scale</th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5-6/10</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>8.5/10</td>
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**Employment goals**
- First Interview: Considering another employment opportunity. Aims to save money and move at some point.
- Second Interview: Staying in current role but will consider resignation if organisational culture does not improve.
- Final Interview: Will be moving on, open to possibilities, such as counselling and private practice.

**Changes**
- Social work study particularly helpful for growth and development and feeding personal interest of lifelong learning. Undertaking post-graduate psychology study
- Experience and reflection have contributed to growth and development, particularly in terms of confidence
- Confidence continues to grow and interested in work that will complement this goal

**Five most prevalent topic codes**
- Support and development; employment; organisational culture; lived experience of identity; beliefs and worldview
- Organisational culture; managers; employment; confidence; lived experience of identity
- Organisational culture; managers; support and development; employment; bullying experiences

**Key quotes**
- But I wanted that sort of um, professional identity I guess from that experience of what I thought social work represented. I didn’t want it to sort of feel like my idea of social work had been a little bit tarnished by what other social workers, what I’d seen other social workers do, in that environment
- ...I feel like that’s probably one thing that I have taken from it is getting a bit more comfortable and a bit more confidence around speaking out if I don’t agree with it...
- I’d say it’s fairly, fairly strong despite the environment I’d probably see that as an 8 or 8½ purely because it just, just identifies I guess to me the importance of my training and the importance of what the social work profession is there to do...
First interview. After three years of social work study, Jessica graduated with a social science degree (welfare major). Over several years, Jessica worked within non-government and government organisations across several locations. Her time with a statutory body was a major turning point as Jessica constantly reflected upon ethical conflicts and how to rectify her professional identity with the organisational culture. Recognising potential burnout led Jessica to resign and even contemplate leaving the profession. Jessica remained as it was her passion and ideal fit: “So I feel like I’m more on track now...with what I wanna do and it’s sort of reaffirmed that yes this is the right way...”

Jessica returned and completed her final year of social work study in 2012. It was an opportunity to create a space to reconnect with and build her professional identity and consider the impacts of systems and organisational cultures upon practitioners and clients.

After her social work studies, Jessica accepted a position with a local NGO and found the job-seeking process in a large rural centre interesting:

...I found it really difficult to get into the industry. Even though, yeah, even though I had a degree and had experience um, it, that’s when I started to discover it’s very much about networks and connections and who you know...and a lot of jobs don’t even get advertised...And that’s actually how I got this position was through my social work supervisor.

At the time of our interview, Jessica was at a crossroads in considering a position in a metropolitan city.

Jessica described her professional identity as including a clear sense of how she would like to be as a social worker, as well as having room to gain experience and continue learning:

Even though I’ve got a little bit of experience but like especially cause I’ve only just finished that qual. But so I guess it’s, I feel like it’s sort of normal for me to question, well, you know, um, like my practice and how good is it, and obviously you’ve still got a lot more to develop, but like you’re still sort of um, question sometimes, un, whether you have, have enough knowledge or skill to be able to, to do the sort of work that’s needed.
Meaningful self-care and relationships with colleagues remained an important part of these experiences for her.

Main interpretation: Professional identity can be impacted by a range of factors, and it is important to be able to connect with what social work means to one, and then gain further experience.

Second interview. Not long after the first interview, Jessica moved to pursue the position offered in a major city. Jessica enjoyed the move and area of work but joined her organisation at a time of major change in the sector. Such changes were indicative of a managerial discourse that placed emphasis on competition, consumer choice, efficiency and effectiveness. Over time, problems with change management began to have an impact on the organisational culture: “We’ve had clients who have left; we’ve had workers who have left; our manager resigned...it’s affecting our reputation...”

There were tensions with management and this became a significant part of Jessica’s lived experience. Guided by her social work identity, Jessica became a vocal advocate within her agency. She voiced the needs of team members and clients, and focused on trying to find appropriate solutions:

...when I try and identify things I try and have a list of possible solutions or possible things that we can do – I will not say that they will work but I don’t just want to be bringing up all the negatives, and also too identifying what is working well.

Such actions led to bullying and unfavourable treatment from management, as well as no relevant change. Despite this, Jessica’s confidence had grown and she was determined to stay, particularly within her positive team environment. However, Jessica stated she would consider finding work elsewhere if these issues continued or if she found her personal well-being was compromised.

Main interpretation: A social work identity can provide one with strength in challenging organisational environments.

Final interview. Many of the organisational issues had worsened over previous months. Jessica had seen the positive team environment disintegrate as staff left or was separated from each other. An independent evaluation of their service
emphasised the problematic experiences of clients and employees, but Jessica was unconfident management would take this on board.

Jessica made the decision to look for another job. Jessica also wanted to find a position that would allow her to grow and develop. Jessica said she needed professional development opportunities, supervision, relevant support and quality management:

*I think that’s one thing that’s really been made clear from probably really early on in my career, because I was fortunate in my first job to have a fantastic manager. And the difference that that made to how much I enjoyed my work I guess we do enjoy our work but it makes a significant difference if you’ve got somebody who’s client focused and supportive and even if they don’t agree with what you say, they still listen to you...*

While it was not an ideal year, Jessica gained further confidence in her professional identity, especially in dealing with organisational challenges. Having previous experience in the field was helpful with her current experiences: “I’m thankful that at least I had some experience there because otherwise I think it would’ve been quite a, quite a challenging, because it’s been a challenging work environment for people who’ve had lots of experience”.

Being connected to like-minded team members who provided relevant support was also crucial.

Main interpretation: Over the long term, it is important to experience a nurturing environment and be able to grow within a role.
### Table E16

**Belinda**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Final Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity scale</strong></td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>2-3/10</td>
<td>1/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment goals</strong></td>
<td>Satisfied with gaining permanent position in current organisation</td>
<td>Prefers the field of practice but if the organisational culture does not improve, will consider leaving</td>
<td>Interested in having her professional needs meet in new position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes</strong></td>
<td>Education contributed to growth and development, as well as life-experiences and employment</td>
<td>Experiencing erosion of identity as a result of poor work environment – is surviving rather than thriving</td>
<td>Has just been accepted into a new graduate program in a government organisation, and was looking forward to a learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Five most prevalent topic codes</strong></td>
<td>Managers; lived experience of identity; impacts of education; dominant perceptions; clarifying distinct identity</td>
<td>Support and development; managers; organisational culture; bullying experiences; burnout experiences</td>
<td>Perceptions of being newly qualified; erosion of identity; support and development; employment; burnout experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key quotes</strong></td>
<td>I really felt like I’ve been able to integrate my learning and my knowledge from the degree and the theories and um all the other things I was talking about I draw on, into my own personal values and into sort of my own social work sort of identity, from which I can practise.</td>
<td>And it hasn’t been a learning environment, it’s been like a war zone….it has just been about doing the right thing and getting by rather than actually practising</td>
<td>Yeah, I feel like I haven’t had a chance to work on anything, just managing each day as it comes, not actually bettering anything.</td>
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</table>
First interview. Belinda had a long-term interest in the human services sector, much of which was motivated by a family member’s own journey. Belinda chose social work because she preferred a holistic approach for intervention. Belinda completed most of her social work studies with a metropolitan institution. During this period, she did overseas volunteering and later, undertook paid work. After a year of work, Belinda joined CSU to finish her studies and found her previous experiences were a great asset for study and current practice: “...I think because of my growing, my maturity I guess, and because of my learning and my experiences I’ve developed more of a confidence in my ability as a practitioner”.

As part of transitioning, Belinda was motivated to reflect and clarify her distinct social work identity, particularly when working with colleagues from various backgrounds, qualification levels and working within a generic-titled role:

So I think it’s, I don’t know I just feel like it’s important to keep that identity in place because I’ve done the work and I’ve done the degree and I know the theories, and I think you can, I don’t wanna get too much drawn into the other side where I stop thinking about that

A manager expressed to Belinda that her role-identity takes precedence over her professional one. In response to this, Belinda found her social work identity became stronger; she could see how her role complemented her professional identity:

...when I think about my manager, that makes me feel stronger in my identity because I think that’s not right, that’s not right. And then I think about how essentially I am a social worker and I feel like that’s defining for me. And I feel because of my degree I have those things to draw on, and there’s a code of ethics and things like that, no matter what I do my practice will be social work practice.

Belinda stated these interactions could still impact her, and so it was important to continue with lifelong learning and reflecting on what it means to be a social worker. Belinda described her professional identity and confidence within her organisational environment as fluid and contextual to interactions with others, especially managers.
Main interpretation: Being in a generic role and with diverse workers can prompt one to further clarify a social work identity and the distinct contribution one can bring to the workplace.

Second interview. Over time, Belinda’s work environment became negative and stressful, as some managers influenced the organisational culture in detrimental ways. Belinda was driven to grow and develop but daily survival took precedence. This led to stagnation, feeling unvalued, losing confidence and experiencing erosion of identity: "I just feel like it’s been a bit of a toxic environment...especially as a new social worker trying to...hold onto and keep developing a social work type identity”.

There was no support or time to reflect and allow room for growth. Belinda could see she was on a path towards burnout: “I've found that very stressful and negative, and I feel like I'm on my way to burning out [Laughs] I don’t think it’s been good at all”.

Belinda described a range of personal and professional impacts, including being unable to fully practise as the social worker she envisaged to be. Despite self-awareness of how workplace bullying and burnout was impacting her, Belinda felt trapped and unable to achieve change. She was hoping that a new manager (due to begin soon) would make a difference. However, if the environment did not improve, Belinda was considering resignation by the end of the year. In reflecting on these experiences, Belinda consistently reinforced the importance of a nurturing environment that has learning and support embedded across all layers of the organisation, particularly management.

Main interpretation: Workplace bullying and not being able to express social work identity, and grow within it can contribute to erosion of identity.

Final interview. The year was far from ideal for Belinda: “…I was saying to someone the other day that I felt like a survivor, I survived, and I’m very glad to be getting out”.

No improvement had been made in her organisation. Belinda applied and was successful for another position. At one point, Belinda contemplated leaving the profession entirely. However, Belinda realised she was committed to the profession just not her current organisation and role. The job-seeking process was stressful because Belinda believed she had no confidence in her social work identity: “...I just
feel like I had nothing to offer, nothing you know, and I don’t feel connected with the whole social work thing”.

Belinda was fearful she would be unable to answer questions about theory and practice, as she had no opportunities to practice and develop during the year.

Looking to the future, Belinda hoped the next 12 months would be like a “do-over” with opportunities to experience a nurturing environment and reconnect with what it means to be a social worker. At this stage, Belinda was not driven by her passion for a particular field of practice but by her professional needs, including quality supervision and support.

To capture her experiences, Belinda shared a wilted flower that contained a new leaf: “Initially I was going for like a dried lemon…But then then I thought well, I’ve got this hope for the future now”.

There was a sense of growth and blooming within the very early stages of her transition; however, it wilted very quickly afterwards. Despite this, a new leaf representing growth was now possible because Belinda was heading towards a new journey.

Main interpretation: In order to thrive, social workers need room to grow their professional identity and be well supported within the organisational context.
| **Table E 17**
| **Catherine** |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Identity scale** | First Interview | Second Interview | Final Interview |
| | 6/10 | 6-7/10 | 7/10 |
| **Employment goals** | Had intended to be in child protection but satisfied with gaining permanent position | Staying in current role but still open to other opportunities | Same |
| **Changes** | Education was an important beginning point for learning. Field placement offered an important opportunity to undertake in-depth work. Regained social work identity after experiencing some impacts of vicarious trauma during an intense field placement | Knowledge, skill and confidence have grown and deepened. Nonetheless, aware there is always more to learn | Knowledge and skill developed, particularly in terms of operating effectively within systems. Applying for post-graduate study to build practical skills |
| **Five most prevalent topic codes** | Field placement experiences; lived experience of identity; employment; knowing/thinking as a social worker; beliefs and worldview | Lived experience of identity; support and development; growth and development; learning; doing as a social worker | Support and development; growth and development; lived experience of identity; doing as a social worker; confidence |
| **Key quotes** | …I really admire their [colleagues] professional integrity, their intent, their training, and everything that’s made them the person they are now. And when I look at those people I go, I’ve got a long way to go | So I’m starting to feel more stable, on my feet. [Pause] I feel like when people ask me questions, if I don’t know the answer, I’m competent that I can go and find out the answer | The confidence in it I think that I feel like I can say with confidence I am a social worker…I would say the last five months I would say that I am a social worker definitely, that I feel confident enough to say that. Even though I would have said it to someone before |
First interview. Catherine had a long-term interest in social work that was driven by personal passions:

I’m really interested in people, psychology, sociology, what makes people think, and in my life I look back and I think, I would like to have an impact and be able to help people, I’ve seen people who really needed help.

Catherine became a mature-aged student when she reached a good time to undertake social work study. Being at this life-stage was a strength for Catherine: “...my perspective now is that I’m, better able to pace myself. I’m thinking, you know, I’ve kind of changed from the sprinter to the marathon runner”.

Catherine undertook extensive job seeking and gained a position in an NGO within an area of her broader interests. During job seeking, Catherine emphasised finding an organisation that would be a values fit and could meet her professional needs:

...I’m very aware of the fact that I’m only at the beginning of a career...I’m thinking I may work up to 17 years. I don’t want it to be something that’s insignificant or non-professional, so I’m looking for people who will provide good guidance and who can really manage that and to help me set good career goals

Catherine observed that her sector was going through significant changes that could impact workloads. Support was available through personal strengths, a positive team culture, quality supervision and role models, and access to resources in her organisation.

Catherine reflected on the developmental journey of education, and was now looking forward to gaining experience in translating theory into practice:

...like you read all the theories and you study all this stuff on Plummer and interventions and all that kind of stuff but actually getting on the ground and actually doing it, is something that I haven’t got the training, and I’m looking forward to actually doing that.

Catherine emphasised now was the time to articulate what it means to be a social worker and consolidate her education into her professional identity.
Main interpretation: The transition into the field can be exciting and it is a time to gain experience and consolidate university study into practice.

Second interview. After six months, Catherine successfully became oriented to organisational processes. An important achievement was gaining deeper knowledge and skill for the complex area she was employed in: “I think it’s just deepened”. Catherine consistently reinforced there was always more to learn and was considering undertaking post-graduate study as a result.

Changes within the organisation led to higher workload issues. While management previously supported staff, this was eroding and staff were expected to do more with less. Catherine found it was necessary to monitor possible stressful impacts, especially through strategies like, being good at time management, picking battles, giving management time to adjust to change, and looking for opportunities within the challenges: “I don’t necessarily look at it straightaway as a bad situation; it could be potential for great change that will help the organisation grow”.

Catherine highlighted the experience of balancing role/organisational identity with her social work identity:

...in some ways you have your own individual identity but there’s an organisational identity that can tend to take over what it is you’re talking about and how you’re seeing things and how situations should be dealt with. A lot of that comes under organisational identity. Although I still maintain when I’m talking and working through things with my supervisors or managers, there’s ethical consideration of what I will and won’t do and how I take things into consideration...

A strong level of self-awareness, observation of organisational dynamics, and reflection were important dimensions to balancing these identities. Being guided by social work ethics, theory and evidence-based practice were essential to Catherine, as well as identifying key people to seek advice and guidance from.

Main interpretation: Sometimes a social worker has to balance role, organisational and professional identities. To do this it is important to know what one believes and values, so it can be drawn upon in practice.
Final interview. Catherine’s knowledge, skill and confidence continued to develop, particularly for working effectively within various systems: “I have started to learn how to strategically manipulate the systems [laughs]”. A range of challenges had continued and emerged over previous months. First, high workloads were common, particularly as sector-wide changes saw higher demands placed on practitioners. Second, a new supervisor was not competently providing meaningful support and supervision. Third, a significant high turnover of staff had occurred within the organisation, many of whom left without other employment plans. This indicated, among other observations, burnout was occurring around Catherine.

Within this environment, Catherine experienced some stressful impacts. However, Catherine also emphasised the reality that there will always be some kind of impact, due to the nature of work undertaken: “...my personal thoughts around that are is it’s always going to impact you in a negative way. You have to be just willing to manage the impact”.

Catherine emphasised self-awareness, self-care and proactively addressing support and development needs through personal and professional mechanisms: “I don’t wait for an invitation. I go get my needs met”. Catherine intended to stay in her current position, but she had applied for other positions, one of which was a dream job and another that would provide excellent professional opportunities. She was driven by interests and professional needs. However, the positions did not materialise and Catherine remained committed to her current work for now, particularly in order to learn more and continue to achieve positive outcomes.

When reflecting on her whole journey, Catherine emphasised it was positive overall:

...it’s definitely a journey and it takes on different inflections at different times and there’s the ups and there’s the downs and there’s successes that make you feel great on top of the world.

I think it’s been a real positive in my mind. I have really enjoyed it. I love learning and it’s taught me how much I love learning.

I think it’s just an individual learning experience and it’s reflective of what you want to get out of it and what you put into it.
Being committed to learning and building on university study during the first year out, was an important part of Catherine’s journey.

Main interpretation: The first-year journey can be characterised by ongoing learning but one has to be committed to doing it.