Social Workers and Child Welfare: Perceptions and Factors of Career Trajectory After

Graduation

A Dissertation Presented to

the Faculty of the Doctor of Social Work Program of

Kutztown University/Millersville University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Social Work

By Abigail Ann Wilson

March 25, 2022

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and my "herd" of friends. To my parents, Thomas and Melanie Wilson, for unconditional love and support in my education and goals. To my life partner, Brandon Morrow, who believes in me before I believe in myself and my greatest source of love. Thank you for lifting me up and being with me every step of the way. To my daughters, Elysa and Abigail, whose bold and fierce personalities gave me strength when I was tired. Believe in yourself and you can do anything you put your mind to. This work could not have been possible without all your love and support.

I would also like to dedicate this study to children and youth in Pennsylvania's public child welfare system. Your experiences entitlement to permanency were and continue to be a constant motivation for me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was made possible with the assistance of many individuals. First, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Heather Girvin, who believed in me, helped me to grow as a researcher, and was a constant source of encouragement. You made this process stress free and fun, and I have learned so much from you. I am so thankful to have had you as my dissertation committee chair. I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Rice and Dr. Jennifer Frank for providing their invaluable assistance. Thank you to Dr. Johanna Greeson, who supported me throughout my graduate degree and provided invaluable assistance with my dissertation. Finally, thank you for working as a great team to help me achieve my goals.

I want to express a special appreciation for the Master of Social Work graduates who took the time to share their thoughts and perceptions of the public child welfare system. Your dedication and commitment to social work makes a difference to everyone you work with. Finally, I would like to thank my doctoral cohort for walking along side me in this journey and providing encouragement and support.

APPROVAL PAGE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Kutztown University/Millersville University, 2022

Millersville, Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Public child welfare agencies struggle to recruit and retain staff even with numerous schools of social work programs that educate students to work in public child welfare. The purpose of this study is to track the factors related to career trajectory and perceptions of recent Master of Social Work graduates after their education and specialization in child welfare. The qualitative, phenomenological study focuses on the decision-making process in the job search as well as what or who influenced that decision. Findings suggest changes to public child welfare as well as schools of social work.

Keywords: child welfare, public child welfare, social work graduates

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

One of the three grand challenges of social work is individual and family well-being

(Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2021). The public child welfare system is one of the largest

systems working with families. Children and youth enter this system because it is determined

that the family has abused or neglected the child or allowed the child to be abused. Child abuse is

believed to be under-reported, with child abuse and neglect known as a public health concern

internationally (Baker et al., 2021). It has become increasingly apparent that the public child

welfare system is not meeting the needs of families. Public child welfare is a challenging

profession that requires skilled workers who can collaborate with other stakeholders in the field

(DePasquale, 2017). The field of child welfare has come under increased scrutiny for the

preparedness of caseworkers, reporting systems, and outcomes for children. In response, efforts

have been made to specialize the training for public child welfare workers. Simultaneously, it has

been noticed that fewer master's level social work graduates are choosing to work in the public

child welfare sector.

Skilled, prepared workers are needed to help the children and families served by the

public child welfare system. The recruitment and retention of workers in public child welfare has

been recognized as a problem in Pennsylvania and nationwide for decades (University of

Pittsburgh, 2021). The perception of public child welfare workers in the media has become

increasingly negative, thereby increasing the challenges facing the system. Social workers enter

the field with the intention of helping others. However, public child welfare is not meeting the needs of children and families entering the system, and its organizations are not meeting the needs and motivations of the social workers who have entered the field to help others. Although a master's degree in social work is not required to work in public child welfare, it does adequately prepare workers with the skills required to work in the field. Graduates of schools of social work are, therefore, making calculated decisions about their careers and what jobs they should opt for based on their perceptions of public child welfare and ascribed and achieved statuses.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to track the factors related to the career trajectory of master's level social work graduates after their education in child welfare. This study also seeks to understand MSW post-graduates' perceptions of working in public child welfare and their sources when making career decisions. The investigator will also seek to understand if there are connections between perceptions of MSW graduates with social justice or injustice. There are clear efforts to improve the preparedness and education of the public child welfare workforce (e.g., Title IV-E). Still, there are not enough qualified social work graduates going on to work in public child welfare. Examining the considerations of MSW graduates entering the field will provide some guidance as to why the current public child welfare system faces difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified professionals.

Background

Child Welfare in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's child welfare system is supervised through the Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) at the state level. Services are administered through each of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania that have their own public child welfare agency. Pennsylvania is a unique state, breaking into counties and providing counties with the autonomy to structure their public child welfare agencies within reason of the law. Each county contracts services such as adoption, foster care, or independent living to private provider agencies. The county agencies maintain the responsibility of child abuse and neglect investigations. Although certain child welfare services are contracted out, public child welfare workers continue to experience high caseloads and burnout (DePasquale, 2017). This, in turn, can lead to challenges in identifying child abuse and neglect during that initial investigation.

Philadelphia, a county in Pennsylvania, has a unique public child welfare system when compared with other counties in the state. Philadelphia public child welfare is referred to as the Department of Human Services (DHS) with the role of conducting child abuse and neglect investigations and supporting families through different programs (Community Legal Services, 2019). If DHS determines that a family needs services, even if evidence of abuse has not been found, then they may refer the family to a Community Umbrella Agency (CUA). A CUA is a provider or agency that has specialized services for children and families and has been hired by DHS (Community Legal Services, 2019). CUAs can provide case management services, which would normally be delivered by the public child welfare agency, as well as other similar responsibilities.

In 2017, Auditor General Eugene DePasquale released an action plan regarding child welfare in Pennsylvania. The final concluding point of this report states that the Pennsylvania child welfare system is broken, and that system partners must collaborate to repair it

(DePasquale, 2017). This report provided recommendations for public child welfare agencies as well as the general assembly, Department of Human Services (state level), the Child Welfare Resource Center, Pennsylvania State Police, private service providers, and the State Civil Service Commission (DePasquale, 2017). This report ultimately identified a lack of available resources and significant challenges facing public child welfare workers. Notably, recommendation number 21 advised public child welfare agencies to partner with local schools of social work to provide experience to potential public child welfare caseworkers (DePasquale, 2017).

In 2019, 54 child fatalities were observed due to maltreatment (Williams, 2020). Over 41,000 children were assessed through an investigation of abuse and neglect (Williams, 2020). Amongst the 41,000 investigations, 4,817 children were found to be victims of child abuse and maltreatment (Williams, 2020). The majority of the perpetrators (53 percent) were parents of the children (Williams, 2020). These alarming numbers combine with significant events to place additional pressure on the public child welfare system in Pennsylvania.

In Pennsylvania, there has been a shift in public child welfare due to public exposure and legal proceedings from the Sandusky case (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). This high-profile case led to policy and statutory recommendations from the Task Force on Child Protection, which was formed through the Pennsylvania General Assembly (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). In February 2018, President Trump signed the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) into law, which was implemented in Pennsylvania in October 2021 (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2021). FFPSA has again changed the climate of child welfare in Pennsylvania as the first federal legislation to shift funding to prevention and evidence-based practice services to keep children with families (University of Pittsburgh, 2021).

Role of the Media

Over the years, the news and media have showcased the downfalls of public child welfare and has added to the challenge of recruiting skilled workers for the field. In 2020, Netflix, a streaming service, aired a documentary about the case of Gabriel Fernandez that took place in California (The Times Editorial Board, 2020). This documentary shared the nuances of the case, the abuses that were inflicted on Gabriel Fernandez, as well as systemic failures that ultimately led to the death of Gabriel Fernandez (The Times Editorial Board, 2020). This documentary took a close look at the public child welfare agency and the caseworkers who encountered Gabriel Fernandez's case. Caseworkers were deemed responsible and charged with child abuse and falsifying records (The Times Editorial Board, 2020). This is not the first time that a caseworker has been blamed or charged in a child abuse investigation that resulted in the death of a child.

In 2014, in Pennsylvania, Jarrod Tutko, Jr. died from child abuse and neglect. Jarrod was found dead in his home, at nine years old, and weighing 16.9 pounds (The Center for Children's Justice, 2015). This case resulted in an audit and investigation of the Dauphin County Children and Youth Agency (McCormack, 2019). Ultimately, the lack of caseworker education and training were identified as significant contributing factors behind this tragedy (McCormack, 2019). The audit recommended changes in child welfare worker training. The audit also scrutinized the lack of communication between states when families involved with the public child welfare system moved from one place to another. This is one amongst multiple cases within the state of Pennsylvania, where workers were deemed responsible and charged with child abuse.

The news and media are available to anyone with access to them, including people in the community, partners of child welfare services, and even potential students and recent graduates that aspire to work in child welfare. Witnessing child welfare workers on trial and charged with child abuse adds to the horror of a child's death and compounds the notoriety of the public child welfare system. Thus, MSW graduates considering child welfare as a career may be deterred by their awareness of these serious risks. Public child welfare requires workers to make life or death decisions while offering them little support or protection. Professional social workers in child welfare are asked to endure difficult organizational conditions, the potential for child harm or death, and perhaps even the loss of license and career.

Social Work and Child Welfare

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) described social work competence as "the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" (CSWE, 2015). The social work profession is set apart by the inclusion of values in the definition of competence which is particularly important in public child welfare (Greeno et al., 2017). These values contribute to the idea that social workers are the best fit for public child welfare workers. It is important to note here that not all public child welfare workers have social work degrees. There have been efforts in Pennsylvania as well as nationwide to provide special educational programming and opportunities to social work students, as their values and education set them apart and make them an ideal fit in the public child welfare sector.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2013) released the document, "NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare," sharing the history as well as best practices for the field of public child welfare. The NASW recognizes that recruitment and

retention of workers in public child welfare continue to be problematic issues. NASW (2021) supports policies that continue and support education of social work students in public child welfare. Social workers are also required to follow the NASW Code of Ethics, a guide for social workers for conduct in their professional lives, which was approved in 1996 and revised in 2017 (NASW, 2017). The final section, "Ethical Standards," provides the standards as a ground for judgment (NASW, 2017). This means that the violation of these standards could result in license or title removal. Given media coverage of the public child welfare field, social workers are particularly aware of the ethical risks.

The NASW Code of Ethics states, "Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients" (NASW, 2017). Social justice is also a core value of social work along with the ethical principle that social workers should challenge social injustices (NASW, 2017). Social injustices can include issues related to poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and others (NASW, 2017). However, it is questionable whether public child welfare follows these same values, which can deter prepared, skilled workers from entering into the field based on this difference in values.

The International Federation of Social Workers creates a global agenda for each decade. While specific wording related to child welfare is unavailable, there are goals that relate to systems and ideas that influence children and families. Of note is the focus on the dignity and worth of people, social and economic equalities, and the importance of human relationships (IFSW, 2012). Public child welfare works directly within human relationships and promotes understanding regarding the importance of families.

Training Efforts in Child Welfare

The University of Pittsburgh has been integral in the creation of training programs for public child welfare. In 2001 the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work took over Pennsylvania's Child Welfare Training Program which provided training to all employees entering public child welfare (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). Thereafter, in 2012, the name of this program was changed to the PA Child Welfare Resource Center (CWRC) (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). CWRC continues to provide pre-service training to all employees entering and working in public child welfare. Most recently, in 2019, the CWRC released an updated caseworker training named Foundations of Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). Anyone entering public child welfare must pursue the Foundations of Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice course before working with children, youth, and families.

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act provided federal funding through Title IV-E and Title IV-B, Section 426 to design and implement child welfare training programs for public child welfare employees (Greeno et al., 2017). This Act was created to increase retention as well as specialized child welfare knowledge, skills, and competencies (Greeno et al, 2017). Research conducted on these programs shows that they have become a predictor of retention for public child welfare staff members (Zlotnik et al., 2005). In Pennsylvania, the University of Pittsburg has created a bachelor and master level program funded by Title IV-E: Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates Program (CWEB) and Child Welfare Education for Leadership Program (CWEL). These programs have been in effect for nineteen years in Pennsylvania (University of Pittsburgh, 2021).

The University of Pittsburgh releases an annual report that shares program information. According to the latest report 1,251 CWEB graduates have entered public child welfare and 1,494 graduates have graduated from CWEL (University of Pittsburgh, 2021). The University of

Pittsburgh partners with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services OCYF as well as the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA). The mission is to "strengthen child welfare services to Title IV-E eligible children and families in Pennsylvania by increasing the number of educated professionals and equipping them to deal with the increasingly complex demands of public child welfare practice" (University of Pittsburgh, 2021, p. 1). Graduates of both CWEB and CWEL feel that their programs prepared them for working in public child welfare (University of Pittsburgh, 2021).

There are other ways in which organizations as well as leaders in higher education have added to the training efforts of the public child welfare workforce. Some colleges and universities in Pennsylvania have created specializations and certificates in child welfare to promote the field. The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute also provides trainings and supports a workforce in child welfare that can meet the ever-changing needs of children, youth, and families (NCWWI, 2021). The NCWWI tries to meet this need through education and by promoting leadership within the child welfare system. Multiple organizations such as the NCWWI as well as higher education institutes have strived to facilitate advanced education of potential public child welfare workers.

Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture and climate affect workers in public child welfare, such as the intent to stay in public child welfare. Organizational climate can be defined as how people perceive the environment in which they work (Glisson & James, 2002). Organizational culture can be defined as the regular day-to-day operations in an organization (Glisson & James, 2002). Both organizational climate and organizational culture are important elements in the discourse

around public child welfare. Organizational climate corresponds to the internal organization operations, whereas organizational culture relates to the internal perception of a worker.

DePasquale's (2017) report highlights how caseworkers in public child welfare feel overwhelmed with their caseloads and do not think that the training they received is adequate. Feeling overwhelmed without adequate training can lead to turnover within public child welfare. Turnover for caseworkers in public child welfare can be attributed to organizational climate, job satisfaction, and age and sex of workers (Li et al., 2020). Frequent turnover in this field can negatively affect the outcomes for children and families.

Relevance to Social Work

Stakeholders in the field of social work have dedicated significant time and efforts to improve the workforce in public child welfare to improve the outcomes for children and families. In Pennsylvania, colleges and universities utilize Title IV-E funds to incentivize students to enter the field of child welfare while providing them with the education to prepare them for public child welfare. Colleges and universities take the time to create specializations, certificates, and concentrations in child welfare to prepare students to enter the field. Despite these efforts the number of public child welfare workers has continued to decline, increasing caseloads and burnout of workers in the field. The field of social work has been identified as a preferred profession to work in child welfare. It is pertinent information to social work as a profession to know how graduates perceive public child welfare, which, in turn, can influence their career decisions. This study explores those perceptions and relationships.

Leaders in public child welfare have repeatedly noted that caseworkers must be competent and prepared for the field to improve services for children and families. At the

practice level, caseworkers in public child welfare are required to complete a certain amount of continuing education to meet the requirements of their jobs. The number of trainings continue to be increased, improved, and required by public child welfare agencies. However, caseworkers have identified that the trainings they are required to take are a "joke," thereby implying that the trainings do not increase competency of workers (DePasquale, 2017). It is important to have prepared workers, and evidence suggests that trained social workers are the best fit for the job (DePasquale, 2017).

The Family First Prevention Services Act is an opportunity to focus on prevention services within public child welfare. There could be more motivation to work in public child welfare if workers help children and youth stay with families instead of removing them from the home. With more supportive services, this may help workers feel fulfilled by their work and draw more qualified workers to the field. Currently, policies such as the Title IV-E create the scope to gain monetary incentives while working in public child welfare. States can structure the way in which these funds are utilized with some guidelines through the federal law.

Theoretical Framework

The general perception of public child welfare has grown increasingly negative, and the number of prepared social work graduates entering public child welfare as professionals has continued to decline (Depasquale, 2017; Warner, 2014). These phenomena can be explained utilizing symbolic interactionism theory, organizational culture and climate theory, rational choice theory, and exchange theory. Symbolic interactionism and organizational culture and climate theories will be used to understand MSW students' perception of public child welfare. Rational choice and exchange theories will create a framework for understanding how graduates' career choices are related to their perceptions of public child welfare.

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is derived from the works of George Mead (1934) and

Herbert Blumer (1969). The primary tenet of SI theories is that people assign (i.e., cognitively

connect) definitions to cultural symbols. People then base their actions on this constructed

understanding of the world around them (Payne, 2005). Symbols emerge from interactions with

the external world and can be anything from language to the form and function of an institution,

such as public child welfare. Symbols are influenced by the larger social world, and their

meaning can change. Similarly, a person's understanding of a symbol may change to match

others' perceptions of the same symbol (Payne, 2005; Handberg et al., 2014). This theory has

three general assumptions: people work toward and act upon what signifies meaning for that

individual; meaning is derived from social interaction; and meaning is adapted through

interpretive processes (Handberg, et al., 2014). In the SI perspective, individuals are perceived

and understood within the context of their environment.

The SI perspective also suggests that within the environment, there is a shared

understanding among individuals of these meanings (Handberg et al., 2014). This occurs through

an interactive process with the world and people around them. An individual may identify what a

symbol means to them personally within the context of what is happening around them. This can

be influenced by the media, events, and people who provide information. This definitional

process is fluid; the individual is constantly taking in new information that may substantiate

and/or change their understanding of a particular symbol. Over time, a stable symbolic meaning

emerges, and the individual makes decisions based on this understanding. Individuals can be

influenced to share the same meaning as others, even though a particular individual might define

the meaning for themselves. Personal experiences also play a part in how information is received and interpreted by each individual person (Handberg et al., 2014).

Symbolic interactionism provides a useful framework to understand humans' behavior within their environment and social contexts (Handberg et al., 2014). Qualitative research strategies align with SI, as they require researchers to "mine" data for constructed themes and meaning and prompt researchers to notice how meaning shapes the phenomenon being studied. The SI perspective can be helpful in working with individual clients in micro social work practice, as it encourages the examination of meaning related to relationships or situations in the context of a person's life (Payne, 2005). SI can also be utilized to explore the different meanings that human groups attach to symbols.

Organizational Culture and Climate Theory

Argyris (1958), Fleishman (1953), and other organizational researchers have explored how the work environment affects employee and organizational experiences since the 1950s. Organizational culture and the organizational climate shape employee performance and outcomes (Williams & Glisson, 2014). Organizational culture is defined as a shared expectation of behaviors and daily norms that play parts in the working environment (Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Verbeke et al., 1998). Cultural expectations are modeled by employees when an individual enters the work environment, and these expectations are reinforced by formal or informal measures. Expectations related to performance in meetings, communication, and even the act of taking breaks are modeled and reinforced. This learning process shapes how employees order and execute job tasks, how they view their work setting, and how they experience the work environment psychologically; in turn, these factors shape employees' well-being (Williams & Glisson, 2014).

Organizational climate is defined as a shared worker perception about how the work environment effects their psychological well-being (Williams & Glisson, 2014). This happens when workers in the same organization have a shared understanding of the same phenomenon. An example could be that the workers at an agency are unhappy with their job due to a shared understanding of being overworked. Organizational climate affects worker motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Williams & Glisson, 2014; Judge et al., 2001). Motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment affect the overall performance and outcome of the organization, and, therefore, —in social service agencies they can produce negative outcomes for the population that workers serve.

Theories of organizational culture and climate are relevant to the social work discipline, as many professional social workers are embedded in agencies and organization. These theories are applicable to the three levels of social work practice, namely micro, mezzo, and macro. Focus on culture and climate can help researchers acquire an enhanced understanding of organizational challenges (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006). In direct, micro practice, this focus might help practitioners understand why clients are experiencing burnout or other frustrations that are affecting their well-being (Williams & Glisson, 2014). Many studies have been conducted on organizational culture and climate within public child welfare agencies and the effects on the services themselves (Williams & Glisson, 2014; Glisson & Green, 2006). Based on this research, more stressful climates can be associated with high turnover rates in public child welfare (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006).

Rational Choice Theory

The origin of rational choice theory (RCT) has been attributed to philosopher Adam Smith (1776), who utilized the work of Thomas Hobbes (1651) to create this theory (Online

MSW Programs, 2021). RCT describes how individuals make decisions based on their own interests, as they attempt to meet their needs or reach their goals (Online MSW Programs, 2021; Blau, 1997; Kelley, 1995; Scott, 2000). RCT decision-making is based on rational thought, that is, the identification of the best course of action to provide the greatest satisfaction to an individual (Scott, 2000; Blau 1997; Boudon, 1998). Coleman (1986) and Hollis (1977) described that RCT is an important theory because of its simplicity. RCT helps individuals weigh the costs and benefits of decisions and then utilize the resources available to increase benefits. If the benefit is lower than the cost, then individuals will not follow through with actions (Online MSW Programs, 2021; Scott, 2000; Boudon; 1998).

RCT is particularly useful in direct practice in understanding motivations of populations, such as MSW graduates, and the clients that social workers serve (Online MSW Programs, 2021; Boudon, 1997). RCT can help to understand choices of certain groups based on cost and rewards; however, it does not account for decision-making in certain groups because the theory focuses on individual actions (Scott, 2000). This theory does not explain groups operating on survival, where there is no time to perform a cost-and-benefit analysis. It is also used to illustrate, predict, and clarify behaviors, such as interventions or policies, which can be applied to large populations in macro practice, as larger change occurs from individual decisions and actions (Online MSW Programs, 2021). This theory leaves out fundamentals in social work practice and conflicts with other theories in social work. The most apparent criticism is that RCT is purely rational and ignores non-rational behaviors of individuals, which are provoked by morals, emotions, and mental and physical health (Boudon, 1998; Blau, 1997; Scott, 2000). RCT believes that there is always a rational reason behind behaviors, whereas other theories place importance on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Online MSW Programs, 2021). It attributes

decision-making to the individual but does not account for external factors in society, such as the roles played by other individuals in one person's achievement of their goals (Blau, 1997).

Exchange Theory

Exchange theory emerged in the 1960s, and it is based upon earlier conceptions of utilitarianism as well as behaviorism. This theory and its derivatives have been featured in the writings of George Homans (1958), Michael Blau (1964), and Richard Emerson (1962) (Cook & Rice, 2003). Utilitarianism is the doctrine that proclaims that actions are right if they are useful or beneficial for a majority. George Homans (1958), a sociologist, wrote, *Social Behavior as Exchange* and described exchange theory as an exchange of activity that is either rewarding or costly (Cook & Rice, 2003; Miller, 2019). Blau (1964) believed that relationships are voluntary and motivated by the reward (Cook & Rice, 2003). Exchange theory is based on the concept that relationships are founded through a cost benefit analysis, and this analysis is utilized to determine the amount of effort put in by individuals in these relationships. Relationships and their activities are fueled by reinforcements in the form of reward; people are driven to receive something in exchange for their actions or activities. These rewards can be mutual in relationships, and relationships can be terminated due to the lack of rewards (Cook & Rice, 2003). Relationships include exchanges between individuals and other individuals, agencies, or jobs. Individuals' expectations may vary, which means they may be higher or lower than others based on their own experiences.

Exchange theory emerges from assumptions about individuals in relationships. First, it is assumed individuals regularly weigh the costs and benefits they will accrue before making decisions regarding relationships (Miller, 2019). The costs weighed in relationships include the outflow of energy and emotion, the input of time, money, and resources, and opportunities lost in

other potential relationships (Miller, 2019). Examples of this include the wages that a worker is offered for a job, the amount of energy put into a job, or the opportunity of a job that pays more. Miller (2019) notes that individuals are watching each other in their decisions and may influence each other in decisions based upon shared or varied calculations of costs and benefits. It is also assumed that activities are voluntary and motivated by rewards; individuals seek rewards and avoid punishments; individuals seek knowledge related to benefits; reward and cost can be material or immaterial; people expect to be rewarded similarly for similar costs; and finally, people understand that costs and benefits will ebb and flow over time.

Exchange theory has been criticized for ignoring the significance of social interactions and being oversimplistic (Miller, 2019). Exchange theory simplifies relationships as rewards that each person gets out of the relationship, or it will not exist. There are plenty of relationships where an individual is active in the relationship even though they do not receive any rewards. Exchange theory also does not address altruism or the act of doing something for others at a cost while expecting nothing in return. Exchange theory can be applied at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in the realm of social work. Exchange theory can help comprehend client motivations or to understand human behavior and relationships. Exchange theory is also utilized to understand groups in a macro setting. Exchange theory can be applied to anything, ranging from romantic relationships to politics. The exchange perspective can provide a calculation that clarifies the decision-making processes of social work graduates engaged in a job search which can also be shaped by professors, other students, and graduates. Recent MSW graduates may include firsthand experience about jobs from professors in their calculations during their decision-making process for jobs. If the costs continue to build in a particular field or job, then a student may decide to opt for another route that provides them with more rewards.

Application to Phenomenon

Recent MSW graduates have obtained both experience and knowledge that prepares them for professional social work practice. Students who specialize in particular fields of practice, such as child welfare, may be especially interested in that particular area of practice. However, the phrase "child welfare" is broad and comprises diverse professional opportunities, including private practice, practice in small, non-profit agencies, macro professional work, such as advocacy, and public child welfare. Public child welfare agencies compete for graduating social workers with other employers and organizations. Consequently, the decisions that social workers make regarding employment are shaped by their classroom and field experiences, cultural symbols regarding child welfare, the influence of mentors, and myriad other factors. Figure 1 depicts the role of theory in clarifying the decision-making process of recent MSW graduates in their job search.

MSW graduates who specialize in child welfare do not necessarily enter professional child welfare practice. For many students, their decision of which field of practice to enter is freighted with inherited perceptions and understandings of what child welfare work entails, as well as factors such as age, income needs, and/or ethnicity. Rational choice and exchange theory can be used to conceptualize this decision-making process. Graduates' demography may constitute some of the factors that are weighed in the decision-making process. Other, more amorphous factors emerge from information that graduates receive from media, professors, field experiences, and peers. Symbolic interactionism describes the process of "meaning making," which creates symbols that are also weighed in the decision-making process. Figure 1 illustrates this concept. This study pursues the possibility that part of the process that we must better

understand is the decision-making of MSW graduates who—in the absence of deterring factors—one might reasonably expect to enter public child welfare.

Figure 1

Interaction of Applied Theories to Recent MSW Graduates

Factors	MSW Graduates Decision Making	Job
• Demographics • Assigned and Achieved Statuses • Symbols and Meanings • Theory: SI, OCC	• RCT and Exchange Theory	• Public Child Welfare • Child Welfare
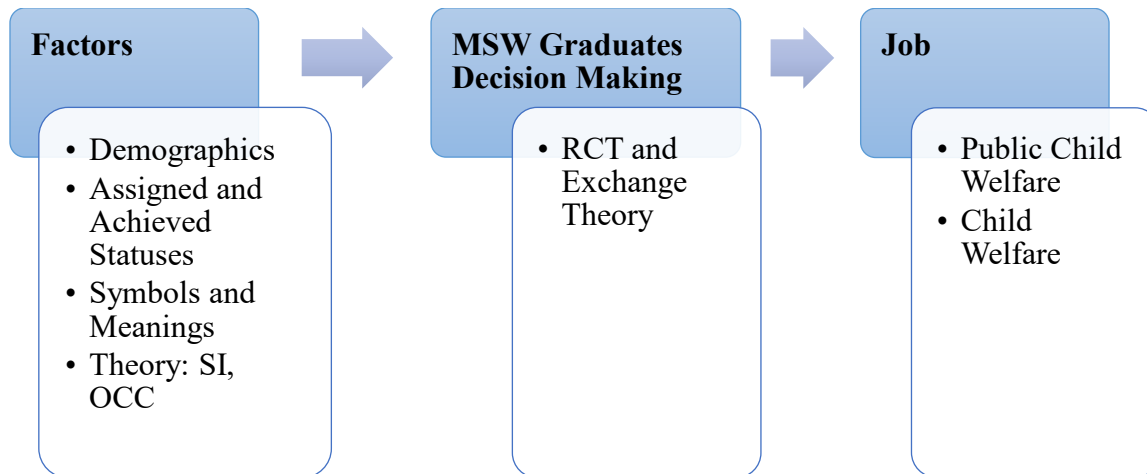
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two provides a review of literature related to factors that can may shape the career trajectory of Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates specializing in child welfare. A history of child welfare laws and their influence on the work of public child welfare is reviewed along with the challenges that public child welfare caseworkers face and the recruitment and retention efforts of public child welfare agencies as they relate to the recruitment of MSW graduates. Perceptions of public child welfare and factors influencing the job search are also reviewed to provide the context for the decision-making processes of MSW graduates.

Selection of Relevant Literature

A systemic literature review was conducted and comprised the following steps: literature search, literature selection, literature analysis, and literature synthesis. Each step is summarized in the subsequent sections.

Literature Search

A literature search was performed on several databases through the Millersville University Library system, EBSCOhost. The search began with terms such as "child welfare" or "child welfare professionals." The search also included the following terms: "Master of Social Work," "Title IV-E," "recruitment," and "transition." The search was limited to include literature published after 2009, and it consisted of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. After culling key articles from the research, the researcher conducted a secondary search utilizing references cited by other researchers. Again, articles published before 2010 were excluded unless they were relevant to the review and had no more recent research available. A literature search was also

performed utilizing Kutztown University and Millersville University Doctor of Social Work

Dissertation searches centered around the phrase "child welfare."

Literature Selection

The literature in this section was selected based on the relevance to the researcher's

dissertation topic and mixed-methods approach. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method

studies were included. The search encompassed literature on all graduating MSW students, with

particular focus on MSW students with special training in child welfare. Only articles written or

translated into English were selected for this review, as a thorough understanding of the language

is needed to conduct an analysis of the literature. These criteria were applied during the selection

process based on the title of articles, the abstract, and full text reading of the articles.

Analysis of the Literature

After selection of the articles, each study was carefully read to understand the problem,

sample, data, methods, and findings. Using these components as headings, the researcher created

a chart to track the articles, their methods, and key findings. As the review grew in scope, the

table was amended to accommodate new information. A secondary organizational strategy

involved organizing the studies based on the general topic.

The synthesis of literature and its critical review has been presented in the subsequent

sections. The history of child welfare, its challenges, and professionals' attempts to mitigate

them have been considered. Limited success in service improvement has led to negative

perceptions regarding public child welfare. Several studies posit that this factor shapes decision-

making among MSW graduates. Other factors that shape the job search have been considered.

Finally, implications of major findings for leadership, education, and practice are considered.

Definitions

The terms "social worker," "caseworker," and "child welfare worker" have been used interchangeably over time. Therefore, it can become confusing to understand the differences between these terms. It is important to note that not all workers within a public child welfare agency have social work degrees. So it has created some animosity around what term is used because social workers obtain a specific degree.

Social Worker

The term "social worker" throughout this paper refers to a professional that has obtained a social work degree from an accredited institution either at the bachelor's, master's, or doctoral level. The International Federation of Social Workers defines social work as a practice that is academically based, which promotes social change and cohesion and empowerment of people (IFSW, 2021). The central principles of social work include social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity (IFSW, 2021). Social workers engage individuals and structures to improve well-being and address challenges in life (IFSW, 2021).

Child Welfare Caseworker

The term "child welfare caseworker" or "caseworker" refers to a direct service professional employed by a child welfare agency with active caseloads assigned by the agency (CWRC, 2021). This can be public or private. Public child welfare caseworkers are government employees, whereas private child welfare caseworkers are not.

Child Welfare Worker

"Child welfare worker" refers to a professional employed at a child welfare agency, but this term does not specify their role or duty. This may include caseworkers, supervisors,

administrators, and/or administrative staff (CWRC, 2021). There are also specifications of public child welfare workers, as they are considered government employees, whereas private child welfare workers are not.

History of Child Welfare Legislation

The history of public child welfare services is vast and includes many pieces of legislation. As more legislation is passed to frame child welfare practices, public child welfare workers experience increased regulation and pressures. Although the United States has made great efforts to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect, millions of children continue to be referred to children and youth agencies every year (Children's Bureau, 2017). The prevention of child abuse relies on community involvement in creating safe environments; however, it can become difficult to regulate this involvement due to the multiple moving parts (Children's Bureau, 2017). This, in turn, can lead to attempts to regulate the system through policy. With each law being passed, more responsibilities are assigned to public child welfare workers.

Child welfare legislation has been utilized to solve more than just child abuse. This legislation also involves solving issues such as poor living conditions for children while adding to the overall number of existing laws. In the United States, child welfare began with the orphan trains in 1830 with homeless children in the northeast being transported to the west to new homes (Sethi, 2019). At that point in time, the homelessness of children was attributed to parents' death or poverty. The Children's Aid Society, founded by Charles Boring Brace, transported children by train to Michigan, Chicago, Iowa, and Pennsylvania in 1854 (Sethi, 2019). These children were adopted by families with no background checks and were often expected to perform hard labor for their adoptive family in exchange of food and shelter.

Pennsylvania began passing legislation around child welfare before the federal government even became involved. Pennsylvania made it illegal for homes that adopted children to adopt two or more unrelated children without the proper license in 1885 (Sethi, 2019). In the 1900s, the United States federal government supported the authority of states to remove children from homes if they were abused or neglected in their homes, thereby establishing the important role played by government in child welfare (Sethi, 2019). In 1912, the Children's Bureau, a federal agency, was established by the Congress to basically review and report on anything related to children's lives and welfare (U.S. House of Representatives, 2011). The Children's Bureau greatly contributed to the research and knowledge of children's issues.

Child protection agencies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided voluntary assistance when concerns about child welfare were raised, such as poverty and abuse (Myers, 2008). In the 1950s, child protection and child welfare became a political issue, which was made known by novelists, painters, and journalists (Hamalainen, 2016). This is the first occurrence of media influence on policy in relation to public child welfare. The federal government first became involved with services with amendments to the Social Security Act in the 1950s, as child protection services continued to function at the local and state levels (Marsh, 2020). The identification of the problem was really related to poverty in society, and the government attempted to solve the problem with legislation.

During the 1960s, there were few child protection agencies operating throughout the United States, with only ten remaining in 1967 (Marsh, 2020). At this point in time, it was not required at the federal level for states to have a system for responding to allegations of abuse and neglect. This was mostly due to lack of funding and structure as well as the general unawareness about the real issues. In the 1960s, the federal government started to provide reimbursement to

states for foster care through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The best interest of the child idea came about in the 1970s which shifted the perspective from the family and society to the child and their rights as well as the reduction of time in foster care (Hamalainen, 2016). Dr. Henry Kempe and his team were the first to identify child abuse and neglect in 1962 and shared it in *The Battered Child Syndrome*, thereby allowing doctors to recognize child abuse and neglect and understand how to report it (Kempe, 2021).

In 1974, the federal government passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), becoming the first entity to address child abuse and neglect, and required states to create a system to respond to it. Prior to this, voluntary agencies with little funding tried to serve this population, leaving gaps in services. CAPTA included federally funded mandates with the purpose of not only reforming child welfare but also recognizing the national problem of child abuse (Marsh, 2020). The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect was created to provide research related to child abuse as well as to become a national clearinghouse for information about child abuse and neglect (NCANTPP, 2014). CAPTA required states to create reporting systems for suspected child abuse and improve investigations in public child welfare agencies (Myers, 2008). In Pennsylvania, the state-wide Child Abuse Hotline and Central Registry, or ChildLine, was created in 1974 (PA Coalition Against Rape, 2014).

Many major pieces of legislation directly affect public child welfare agencies. Public child welfare has undergone many legislative changes due to the lack of understanding and lack of culturally competent practices. There was a point in time where public child welfare workers, without understanding the culture, separated Native American children from their families and placed them in homes outside of their tribes and culture. The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978

was passed to keep Native American children in their families and tribes and include the tribe

members in decision-making regarding a child's future (Child Welfare Information Gateway,

2019). There was a prevalent idea at this time of what a family should look like, and there were

no ethnocentric policies regulating agencies prior to the Indian Child Welfare Act. The Child

Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act was also passed in 1978, and it first

funded adoption programs for children with special needs.

The Child Abuse Amendments of 1984 and the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare

Act of 1980 were passed to address permanency and safety concerns (Child Welfare Information

Gateway, 2019). The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act was the first to provide federal

funding through Title IV-E and Title IV-B, Section 462 to design and implement child welfare

training programs for public child welfare employees (Greeno et al., 2017). In the 1990s, eight

laws were passed, including the Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, Adoption, and Family

Services Act of 1992, the Family Preservation and Support Services Program Act of 1993,

Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994, the Interethnic Provisions of 1996, the Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the Child Abuse Prevention

and Treatment Amendments of 1996, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, and the

Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The 1990s

legislation continued to focus on protecting victims, those living in poverty, and the unemployed,

while fighting against discrimination practices leveraged by public child welfare agencies (U.S.

House of Representatives, 2011).

The 2000's brought about further legislations and additional changes, starting with the

Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000, the Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act of 2000,

and Child Citizenship Act of 2000 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Keeping

Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 amended CAPTA and reauthorized the law (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act of 2006 required states to have timely interstate placements of children. Thereafter, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 was passed to protect children from sexual exploitation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Child and Family Services Act of 2006 reserves funds for states to improve caseworker recruitment, retention, and training (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 focused on adoption and foster care and pushed for children to be placed with relatives.

The CAPTA Reauthorization of 2010 was passed, and the Affordable Care Act provided Medicaid coverage to youth exiting foster care through age 26 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act and the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act were also passed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). CAPTA was amended again through the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). In order to address the substance use and opioid epidemic, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 and the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recover and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act was passed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). In 2018, President Donald Trump signed into law the Family First Prevention Services Act which is scheduled to be implemented by October 2022 (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2021).

With each law being passed, the responsibilities of public child welfare workers are increased. In case of many of the federal laws, states pass their own legislations and processes to

access the funds (Marsh, 2020). Although states and municipalities vary in terms of their implementation process, Pennsylvania publishes bulletins each time a new policy is passed. The bulletins include regulations for public child welfare workers as well as the public child welfare system. Changes in policies, regulations, and bulletins can add to the workload and requirements, which, in turn, increase stress for agencies and workers in the public child welfare sector. Added changes to policies can also bring about challenges in ensuring that caseworkers are familiar with the new laws and the reason behind why more requirements are added around their work.

Challenges in Child Welfare

Various challenges in public child welfare contribute to turnover and job dissatisfaction. Due to different mandates, laws, and regulations, public child welfare workers take on more and more work. Changes to laws, which add work for public child welfare agencies, have been well known in research for some time. The documented results of increased work may influence MSW graduates' decision to enter public child welfare. For example, changes implemented to the CPSL required a case tracking system to process child abuse referrals in electronic form, which is now the Child Welfare Information Solution (CWIS) (Marsh, 2020). This system was launched in 2015 and made the job more difficult for public child welfare workers. Processes took more time to be completed in the computer system when compared to the CY-48 form it replaced. The electronic version now takes about an hour to complete, whereas the paper version took only about 15 minutes (DePasquale, 2017). This section reviews studies and findings related to challenges public child welfare workers face such as burnout, case overload, geographic challenges, and salary.

Caseworker Turnover

The high demands of public child welfare can lead to caseworker turnover. Studies find that several factors contribute to turnover including burnout, conflict, and high demands of the job. Balfour and Neff (1993) and DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) found that the type and level of education a caseworker has predicted turnover rates and those without social work degrees were at higher risk of termination. While Auerbach et al. (2008) found that having a social work degree contributed to retention of workers, less than half of public child welfare workers had a degree in social work (Barth et al., 2008). On the other hand, Hopkins et al. (2010) found that turnover could be caused by stressors, such as burnout, role overload, and conflict. Burnout can be defined as emotional exhaustion, reduction of feeling accomplished, and depersonalization, which can affect social workers' emotional as well as physical health (Green et al., 2014). This exhaustion, work overload, lack of resources, and conflict can lead to cynicism due to inability to do their jobs effectively (Maslach, 2003). It is difficult to find out that the job applied for is not the job that it was thought to be. Social workers expect to enter public child welfare to help children and families, but they encounter high amounts of paperwork and caseloads instead, which leaves little time to work with children and families.

High demands are part of the job, but when these demands continue to build, it can lead to burnout (Marsh, 2020). Increases in caseloads are not necessarily accompanied by increases in budget or the numbers of professional personnel hired. To address this disparity, professionals work overtime and face burnout (Casey Family Programs, 2017). Caseworkers need to complete certain items and tasks within a timeline. For example, an investigation must be completed within 60 days, which can be extended to 90 days at most. Conducting a thorough and complete investigation takes time, but it can become difficult to accomplish with high caseloads. Although caseload sizes may increase, the timelines do not change because they are mandated by law.

Caseworkers only have so much time to complete investigations and meet certain benchmarks to be compliant. High and full caseloads shortly after hire can be overwhelming and can cause turnover (Weaver et al., 2007). The misalignment of expectations and the reality of the job can also contribute to high turnover rates (Marsh, 2020).

Job Dissatisfaction

The job of a public child welfare worker may spill over into their personal or family lives. Caseworkers often work overtime, and this can lead to dissatisfaction with their jobs (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). Some caseworkers are required to be on-call at different times based on a particular agency's mandates. This can be challenging if the caseworker has responsibilities outside of work, such as taking care of one's child (Marsh, 2020; Moyer, 2017). Pennsylvania operates on a county system, meaning that each county can decide how to fulfill the law or mandates. This means that each county can have different policies and practices for on call work and overtime. The unpredictable nature of the job can cause stress outside of the work environment leading to job dissatisfaction.

Job dissatisfaction may also be related to the "type" of clients that public child welfare caseworkers meet in child welfare. Public child welfare workers mostly work with unwilling or involuntary clients, who are mandated to participate through the legal body of child protective services (Rooney, 2008). Clients of the public child welfare system are those who are referred because of concern for the safety of children and youth in respective homes, and caseworkers must work with caregivers, children, and youth who are resistant to the services (Marsh, 2020). Public perception can mean that being referred to public child welfare is a bad thing, and it could also mean that parent is an unfit caregiver (Turney, 2012). Caregivers may not want these services for that reason, as they do not want their children to be taken from them. In some cases,

the children may either not want these services or understand why they are being taken from their caregivers. Dealing with this conflicting situation on a daily basis can be difficult and draining for caseworkers.

Public child welfare can also be a dangerous job, which can push MSW graduates to look at other options. In a study conducted by Skiba and Cosner (1990) with Pennsylvania public child welfare workers, about 50 percent of participants reported verbal assault and 25 percent reported physical assault by clients while on the job. In 2014, a study corroborated this work-related violence of social workers from 1982 to 2012 with rates of psychological violence varying from 37 percent to 97 percent and the rates of physical violence ranging from 2 percent to 34 percent (Robson et al., 2014). Not only have caseworkers experienced violence but also threats, property damage, and attacks at higher levels when compared to their non-public child welfare peers (Newhill & Wexler, 1997). Feeling unsafe at work can lead to turnover in the field as well as burnout (Kim & Hopkins, 2015; Maslach, 1998).

Li et al. (2020) and Glisson and James (2002) found that organizational climate could influence job satisfaction and, in turn, increase the public child welfare workers' intent to leave. In total, 849 direct care workers within 13 agencies were contracted with public child welfare systems in the northeast part of the United States (Li et al., 2020). This study did not provide a measure of turnover, and the generalizability is limited to certain types of workers. The results suggest prioritizing worker satisfaction and providing career development opportunities, even while noting that agencies have financial constraints (Li et al., 2020; Holosko & Faith, 2015).

Supervision

Supervision of public child welfare workers is an important safeguard and tool to quality improvement, if performed correctly. Due to high turnover rates, caseworkers with little experience are often promoted quickly to supervisor positions. The number of caseloads has increased leaving public child welfare workers with higher caseloads. Due to turnover and increased referrals, supervisors must often pick up caseloads as well to cover the number of cases, which can reduce the time and quality of supervision (Westbrook et al., 2012). This is not the way in which supervision is meant to occur. Many supervisors also have little experience because they have been promoted too quickly. Lack of experience leads to a dearth in the quality of the leadership and supervision that caseworkers are receiving. This creates more cracks in the quality of the organization in general and may lead to missteps and errors. Quality supervision has been found to retain caseworkers and improve services overall (Cyphers, 2001; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Westbrook et al., 2012). If the supervisors are unprepared for the position, then this can lead to ineffective and uninformed supervision of caseworkers.

Regehr et al. (2001) conducted a study with public child welfare supervisors and managers to identify stressors. The agency in the study had two high profile child deaths and were scrutinized by the public (Regehr et al., 2001). It was found that during the period of the child deaths, there was increased turnover, high workloads, and added reform and mandates (Regehr et al., 2001). If the leadership had taken greater steps to mitigate these challenges, then these deaths may have been prevented. Regehr et al. (2001) found that these leadership positions actively influence their staff members and can greatly improve the services through effective leadership. This case is akin to that of the Pennsylvania cases discussed previously, including the death of Jarrod Tutko.

Geographic Considerations

Geographical regions can also affect public child welfare services and workers. Public child welfare agencies in Pennsylvania cover rural, urban, and suburban geographic areas. Aguiniga et al. (2013) studied 2,903 public child welfare workers from Texas and found that geographical location was not an indication of intention to leave; however, they stated that geographic location produced many differences between employees. For example, caseworkers in nonurban settings were found to earn less than those in urban settings (Barth et al., 2008). There can also be differences in preparedness of workers due to training.

Pennsylvania requires all child welfare workers to undertake the training "Charting the Course." However, while reviewing this training, it was found that no section of the training is dedicated to rural settings. This is concerning because, in Pennsylvania, the average general protective service reports were almost double in rural counties (34.3 per 1,000 children) when compared to the average for urban counties (17.8 per 1,000 children) (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2019). Out of 5,102 substantiated reports of child abuse, 1,694 (33 percent) were from rural counties (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2019). In fact, the substantiated rate increased to 2.5 per 1,000 children in rural counties in 2018 (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, 2019). This illustrates that there is a significant need for attention in public child welfare for rural areas, and that working in rural public child welfare is associated with additional stressors.

Caseworker Considerations

Many factors shape social workers' decisions to enter public child welfare. One of the most significant factors is anticipated income. In Pennsylvania public child welfare workers' salaries are determined by county, state, and federal guidelines, which can become confusing for workers entering the system. In case of social workers employed by the state, these salaries are

generally low, especially for entry level caseworkers, which can lead to workers feeling devalued (Augsberger et al., 2012). According to the PA Auditor General's Office, the average starting salary for caseworkers was $30,018, which is less than other starting salaries for workers with bachelor's degrees by about $20,000 (DePasquale, 2017). Finnerty (2017) reports that the salary is just over $21,000 annually in Snyder and Montour counties and just over $22,000 in Northumberland County. In PA, as per the Department of Human Services (DHS) guidelines (2018), when it comes to qualifying for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a family of three qualifies if they earn $32,676 annually. This means that public child welfare caseworkers earn below the optimum level required to obtain basic family sustenance (Marsh, 2020).

Borzaga and Tortia (2006) examined child welfare workers' motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty in the field by conducting a study of 228 public, non-profit, and for-profit organizations. This quantitative study reviewed economic and extrinsic incentives as well as relational incentives as variables. Results showed that workers who were intrinsically motivated were more satisfied with their jobs (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006). A study conducted by Borzaga and Tortia (2006) found that workers in the public sector were the least satisfied with their jobs and that loyalty to the agency was associated with pay. Based on the literature reviewed, even with motivation, workers in public child welfare face challenges that prompt departure from their public child welfare careers.

An important and substantively different, and potentially provocative point is that the processes of public child welfare often contradict the values of social work. According to ethical standards, social workers should develop trusting relationships with their clients, but public child welfare workers are cautioned against trusting clients referred for maltreatment of children

(Turney, 2012). This makes the job more challenging because caseworkers must engage families in services while keeping children safe, which can mean removing children from their families. A study conducted in Texas with the purpose of better understanding factors associated with turnover found that caseworkers and social workers can be unprepared for the investigative aspects of child welfare (Marsh, 2020). The investigation can lead to unsafe places as well as confrontation. Social workers who enter the field of public child welfare meet responsibilities that go against their values and ethics as a profession, which ultimately leads to dissatisfaction with the job.

The problem of burnout in public child welfare is not unique to the United States. Child welfare workers enter the field often provoked by the motivation of working directly with children and families. Tham (2018) completed a study of social workers in child welfare in Sweden, examining how work conditions have changed over the span of eleven years between 2003 and 2014. Tham (2018) sampled social workers in child welfare who were specifically working with referrals and investigations, by utilizing the Nordic Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work distributed through email. Variables included workload, complexity of tasks, and quality of upper management. This study found that higher work demands with deteriorated work conditions contributed to a higher rate of intention to leave the workplace (Tham, 2018). Overall, child welfare workers had less time to work directly with clients, and differences were observed in the job content from 2003 to 2014.

Improving Services through Training

Research on the inadequacies of public child welfare is vast and has sparked efforts to improve services to families. Many studies seek to address the recruitment and retention challenges faced by public child welfare agencies (Tham, 2018; Strand et al., 2015;

Bagdasaryan, 2012; Pierce & Park, 2018). Strand et al. (2015) found that the focus area for child welfare agencies was to ultimately enhance the quality of practice. To accomplish this goal, public child welfare agencies must recruit and retain a full and competent staff. Other solutions to enhance the quality of practice include amending or developing laws, restructuring agencies, or restructuring funding. Some believe that public child welfare workers should have a social work degree. At the national level, about half (48.8 percent) of public child welfare workers have a degree other than social work, and about 39.5 percent have a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or MSW degree (Barth et al., 2008). To attract social worker students to the field, Title IV-E funds were made available to help students pay for their education and secure a job after graduation. Universities have also created certifications and specializations in child welfare to improve the education of social work students.

Child Welfare Training

A number of studies assess the outcomes associated with innovations in Title IV-E training programs for social work students. These trainings are intended to improve quality, recruitment, and retention of public child welfare workers (Strand et al., 2015; Pecukonis, 2016; Lery et al., 2015; Burry et al., 2011). Strand et al. (2015) and Lery et al. (2015) utilized secondary data to analyze the efficacy of the current training programs. Strand et al. (2015) studied curriculum innovation in MSW and BSW programs, which were created to prepare students for child welfare practice. Researchers found that staff members of public child welfare with BSW or MSW degrees were more prepared and stayed in public child welfare longer than those without the degrees (Strand et al., 2015). The innovations reviewed were found to be promising for social work education. However, the generalizability is limited because only two programs were reviewed.

To improve learning experienced by the social work students, researchers integrated new educational experiences into a social work curriculum (Whipple et al., 2006; Burry et al., 2011; Pecukonis et al., 2016). For example, live supervision was incorporated by Pecukonis et al. (2016) through a controlled design. This study also focused on providing specific types of training to MSW students in the child welfare field setting, which would improve their skills (Pecukonis et al., 2016). Students experienced a simulated court experience in an interdisciplinary environment in a study conducted by Burry et al. (2011). Whipple et al. (2006) provided social work students with an experience that mirrored medical rounds at a hospital. Students provided positive feedback on the training, but more research is needed to ascertain whether training makes a difference for social workers (Burry et al., 2011).

Bagdasaryan (2012) reviewed how well students, that have gone through the Title IV-E programs, perform once hired in a public child welfare agency. Three tests were administered to 1,157 public child welfare workers who were new hires. The tests assessed overall knowledge in child welfare, permanency planning, and case planning (Bagdasaryan, 2012). The results suggested that social work education with a Title IV-E program improves child welfare knowledge, particularly for MSW level students (Bagdasaryan, 2012). Bagdasaryan (2012) noted that these findings were consistent with previous findings that social work education and specialized training are important (Albers et al., 1993; Dhooper et al., 1990; Franke et al., 2009; Gansle & Ellett, 2002; Jones & Okumura, 2000). However, Carr et al. (2019) found that the intent to stay with a similar population was associated with age instead of the fact that the students that have gone through Title IV-E programming. This is different from the findings of previous studies, as it looks at the intention to stay rather than readiness or performance.

The findings of other studies align with the study performed by Carr et al. (2019), finding that students were more likely to stay in public child welfare after undergoing a Title IV-E program (Pierce & Park, 2018; Falk, 2015; Barbee et al., 2018). In the case of those who had positive attitudes before entering child welfare, there was a greater motivation to stay after completing the Title IV-E programming (Pierce & Park, 2018). This study did not have a control group and studied both BSW and MSW students, so the findings are limited. On the other hand, Barbee et al. (2018) found that secondary trauma and stress in the job can negatively influence the intent to stay. While Title IV-E programming can enhance the training, it does not explain the phenomenon of MSW graduates choosing jobs outside of public child welfare. A mixed methods study of the effectiveness of Title IV-E programs from the point of view of the students found that students noticed discrepancies in what they were being taught versus what was happening in the field (Greeno et al., 2017). For example, training was focused on clinical skills and students perceived their role in child welfare from the purview of clinical and case management activities; however, in their field placement, students found that the focus was on completing the work rather than clinical skills (Greeno et al., 2017). This study had a control group and a diverse sample of 225 MSW students over five academic cohorts (Greeno et al., 2017).

In their study of feedback related to training from child welfare practitioners, Griffiths et al. (2018) identified three major themes related to program improvement. This qualitative study included 189 responses from frontline child welfare practitioners (Griffiths et al., 2018). Themes related to training improvement include more realistic training, specific types of training, and supportive training environments. Generalizability of this study is limited, as the sample includes only one agency (Griffiths et al., 2018). Results supported the fact that training should not only

be enhanced through curricula innovation but also through additional training at the point of job entry.

Perceptions of Public Child Welfare

Perceptions of public child welfare can reduce the eagerness of social work students to enter the field. Negative views of social work can be found as far back as 1973 on the event of the death of Maria Colwell, it was at this point in time that social work was first connected to a child's death, which was believed to be preventable (Butler & Drakeford, 2011). Following the death of a child, demands for reform emerge through political platforms, usually triggered by media coverage. This dynamic leads to the creation of higher standards of worker accountability, and it has the additional consequence of creating anxiety for the workers (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2011; Laliberte et al., 2011).

A multi-state study of 2,910 public child welfare staff using the Perception of Child Welfare Scale found significant factors of stigma, nature of work, blame, and respect (Lawrence et al., 2019). Public child welfare workers often feel blamed by media after tragedies, which can trigger feelings of job insecurity (Lawrence, et al., 2019). Studies on the relationship between public child welfare and the media have been conducted internationally (Warner, 2014; Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017; Hove et al., 2013; Laliberte et al., 2011). In sum, the media's portrayal of public child welfare shapes future workers' perceptions and sparks real changes among public child welfare agencies. This may result in a misalignment of workers' expectations, perceptions, and lived experiences in public child welfare work settings, thereby making it less likely that workers would choose and then persist in public child welfare professional positions.

Media Influence

Research has been conducted through reviews of newspaper articles and other relevant media to determine the relationship between public child welfare and the news media internationally. Through an analysis of newspaper articles and the daily Hansard record of political exchanges in the House of Commons in England, it was found that social workers were portrayed as cold, inhumane, and disconnected (Warner, 2014). In the United Kingdom, television shows were analyzed, and researchers found that social workers do little to improve public perception of public child welfare (Henderson & Franklin, 2007). A similar review was conducted in New Zealand, and Australia's struggle with the media has also been documented (Goddard & Liddell, 1995).

This negative depiction is not only limited to public child welfare workers but also extends to most of human services (Holzer & Slater, 1995; Spicer, 1995). Lee and Paddock (2001) and Wielde and Shultz (2007) indicate a more complex reason behind the negative depictions. Wielde and Shultz (2007) studied the depictions of human services in American movies and identified five different depictions, two of which were largely negative. These studies concluded that media does not help the perception of public child welfare workers and, in fact, contribute to the negative perceptions (Wielde & Shultz, 2007; Mickel, 2009; Ayer, 2001). Results of news media coverage when a tragedy occurs in the public child welfare domain can result in the termination of public child welfare staff, including directors. This can lead to the public's belief that the public child welfare agency was to blame or at fault, thereby creating a negative image of public child welfare in their minds (Laliberte et al., 2011; Walters 2010).

Coverage by the media is powerful and occurs in multiple forms, which can lead to reactionary changes in public child welfare and a "blame game" that further stigmatizes public

child welfare workers and their supervisors (Laliberte et al., 2011; Garrett, 2009; Munro, 1999). In a content analysis study by Cooper (2005), it was found that more rules and procedures were imposed upon the public child welfare workers by management in 2003. Public child welfare staff felt a lack of support and that this, in turn, undermined their authority within communities (Cooper, 2005). These changes ultimately reduce morale within the agency as they feel the result of the changes as a form of repercussion (Laliberte et al., 2011). Public child welfare workers understand what happens to their coworkers who make mistakes as they get caught up in the "blame game" presented by the media. In a qualitative review of 1,512 articles from major newspapers from 2008 to 2012, social workers were perceived as receivers of referrals and those who remove children from their home to other placements (Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017). Social workers were blamed when reports were related to something going wrong in the process (Staniforth & Beddoe, 2017).

Given the abundance of negative attention in the media and its cascading effects (that is, negative media leading to reactionary system change and difficult work conditions), some researchers have suggested collaborating with media as a solution. While reviewing articles to improve their view of public child welfare is important, it is just as important to focus on a solution. A study conducted on United States newspapers from 2000 to 2008 found that it is beneficial for child welfare advocates to focus on communication goals to educate the public about their services in response to the negative views created by the media (Hove et al., 2013). This study, however, found that the topic of child abuse in general is framed as an issue that has societal causes as well as solutions. Laliberte et al. (2011) note that the public perception of social workers in the media is generally not positive, but public child welfare workers can be perceived in an especially negative light. Public child welfare workers are aware of this negative

view as well as its influence on public perception. In the study, researchers suggested that educators should prepare graduating public child welfare workers for the media's negative construal of their work. They also posit that part of their training should be preparation for working *with* media and educating them, stating, "our students deserve better" (Laliberte et al., 2011, p. 210).

Gaps in the Literature

The aforementioned studies highlight education, training, media, and job experience among public child welfare workers. A broad review of related research reflects other well-studied and potentially relevant domains. Significant themes include leadership, media, and the length of stay in public child welfare (Warner, 2014; Regehr et al., 2001; Carr et al., 2019). These domains, themselves, may be important variables that shape the information and perceptions that graduating workers receive about public child welfare. Many of them pertain to organizational culture and climate. A few studies examine the roles of supervisors and managers in public child welfare, and their relationship with staff members is a gap in the literature (e.g., Regehr et al., 2001; Marsh, 2020). However, there are gaps in how caseworkers perceive their supervisors and managers as well.

Some research has been conducted on the role of media, and at least one study recommends engaging the media to improve the image of public child welfare (Hove et al., 2013). However, there is no evidence that this approach would work. Literature specifically focusing on the decision-making process, which leads to entering public child welfare, is scant. Social work students enter academia with a motivation to do good and help others (Segal-Englechin & Kaufman, 2008; Stevens et al., 2012). In terms of the field of child welfare, there are more job options than just *public* child welfare. Some work has been done on the job search

as experienced by millennials, in general, but it is not specific to social work graduates. This study would help to fill this gap by focusing on MSW graduates who also fall into the millennial category.

Millennials began entering the workforce in 2004 and will continue entering the workforce through 2022 (Skiba et al., 2020). A qualitative study of 747 millennials and non-millennials was conducted by Skiba et al. (2020). This study found that significant differences existed between the two groups in terms of the job search process and the job. The finding supports the notion that millennials are influenced to a greater extent by their peers, mentors, and colleagues, and they are also likely to accept the first employment opportunity they receive (Skiba et al., 2020). Millennials also value teamwork, supportive supervision, and innovation (Skiba et al., 2020; Calk & Patrick, 2017). While social workers value meaningful work, in general, this is also a strong value for millennials (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). This study utilized self-report data from a specific region, so the results are limited in their generalizability (Skiba et al., 2020).

In a literature review and analysis of 29 studies that provide information about how young adults experience the education to work shift, it was found that this transition is a significant event for young adults (Grosemans et al., 2020). Findings from this study show that finding the right job fit and professional identity is difficult, and that a search for balance between work and life takes place during this time (Grosemans et al., 2020). It is possible that important articles were left out of this literature review based on the search methods. However, this review helped to identify what this event is like for young adults.

In general, there is a general lack of significant research related to the factors associated with the career trajectory of social work graduates with the exception of three articles, with only

two articles based in the United States without any generalizable findings. Iovu and Demian (2019) studied the career trajectory of social work students in Romania through a descriptive study of 291 social work graduates. In general, the first job was started five months after graduation, with only a third getting a job in their field (Iovu & Demian, 2019). As this was a study of Romanian students it cannot be generalized to other social work graduates. This study was an attempt to assess the unemployment or underemployment in the field and more research is needed in other universities or geographical regions to corroborate the findings. Choi et al. (2015) also assessed MSW graduates' early careers through a questionnaire of six cohorts including 246 participants from 2002 to 2006. While most reported they felt prepared and most found employment, about 10 percent were never employed in a job relevant to their specialization (Choi et al., 2015). This sample was from one school as well as a convenience sample, so the findings may not be generalizable. The questionnaire was not psychometrically sound.

Clark et al. (2013) conducted a descriptive and retrospective study on a non-random sample of 415 Title IV-E MSW graduates. Graduates of Title IV-E programs must give back time to public child welfare, and the most drops in retention occurred at the end of this requirement, that is, 24 to 36 months post-graduation (Clark et al., 2013). They found that this could be due to completing supervision for licensure after graduation, which takes about 24 to 36 months. These results were derived from one state only, and they may not be generalizable to other locations. It also does not account for different child welfare education such as a specialization or certification related to child welfare.

Whitaker et al. (2006) conducted research to profile the licensed social work workforce serving children and their families with a random sample of 10,000 social workers drawn from

48 states. A key finding from the study reported that social work continues to be committed to direct service to children and families (Whitaker et al., 2006). The study also found that recruitment and retention must be diversified and that social workers provide services to the most vulnerable children in the country (Whitaker et al., 2006). Another key finding is that organizations that serve children and families experience stressors that hinder the retention of social workers (Whitaker et al., 2006). However, this study is older and did not concentrate on public child welfare jobs or the perception of public child welfare.

Salsberg et al. (2019) conducted a study to survey social work graduates of BSW, MSW, and equivalent programs. All programs were accredited with 53 MSW programs and 49 BSW programs participating in the online survey. The largest types of employers of MSWs working as social workers included private, not-for-profit, and tax-exempt organizations (31.1 percent) and health care organizations (27.9 percent) (Salsberg et al., 2019). The largest type of jobs taken for those in social work included direct work with individuals, families or groups (82.1 percent) (Salsberg et al., 2019). About half of MSW participants were very satisfied with their current position, but they were somewhat satisfied with their overall salary (Salsberg et al., 2019). In terms of work with children, youth, and families, about 25 percent had a concentration in their educational program to work with this population (Salsberg et al., 2019). This study did not concentrate specifically on those with a child welfare specialization or seek to understand the perceptions of public child welfare.

There is a general theme of more studies needed around students transitioning into public child welfare. Studies are needed to follow up with students that have graduated from social work programs to determine whether a commitment to child welfare can support the retention of a worker entering public child welfare (Strand et al., 2015; Barbee et al., 2018). Further research

is needed in reviewing task and self-efficacy over the transition from students to workers (Pierce & Park, 2018). In terms of studying factors of the job search, longitudinal studies are needed to support the current literature. More studies across geographical regions and at more universities are needed to see if the phenomena spread to other regions (Iovu & Demian, 2019). More research is also needed in the public child welfare sector to understand how long workers stay and why (Clark et al., 2013).

Review of Major Findings

Review of the literature suggests that more information is needed to understand how MSW graduates specializing in child welfare perceive public child welfare and their decision-making around finding jobs after graduation. Research tracks the number of social work graduates who accept jobs in the field of social work, but little to nothing is known about *how* MSW graduates make these decisions. There is a great deal of information related to training social work students for public child welfare (through Title IV E funding), but less is known regarding MSW graduates' *interest* in child welfare, in particular. Title IV-E programming has been around for some time now, but it has not prevented the cascading effects of declining interest, organizational challenges, and a lack of prepared workers entering the field.

Various challenges in public child welfare may reduce the eagerness of social work graduates to enter the job or the field. Laws and mandates can have negative implications for public child welfare, sometimes creating additional risk for child welfare workers. Recent MSW graduates that apply for public child welfare jobs may be unaware or unprepared for these challenges. This, along with the investigative and sometimes confrontational nature of the job, can lead to dissatisfaction in the job, contributing to high turnover rates. Research tracks

caseworker overload, burnout, and secondary trauma, but little is known about how graduates receive and are affected by this information during the decision-making processes.

The media drive negative perceptions of public child welfare by tracking its missteps and tragedies. More information is needed to understand how public child welfare workers or students thinking about entering the field hear about and understand the perceptions of public child welfare. It is unknown whether more education affects public perception--and, in turn, graduates' perceptions—of child welfare. This study addresses the dearth of information related to decision-making amongst MSW graduates who are preparing to enter the work force.

Conclusions

It seems apparent that challenges inherent to contemporary public child welfare would deter some new professionals from entering the field. However, despite the significant amount of research addressing the challenges of public child welfare workers, important gaps in knowledge persist and will be explored by the proposed study. An important unanswered question is whether or not the perceptions of MSW graduates are shaped by media coverage of public child welfare challenges, and the extent to which such perceptions shape their decisions regarding job entry.

CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Design

This study's design was driven by three central research questions listed below. Both primary and secondary data have been utilized. This study incorporates a qualitative methodology. This qualitative approach allowed the investigator to explore a topic about which little is known and to capture the lived experiences of respondents (Padgett, 2017). Some descriptive statistics are included. Primary data were collected through online surveys and interviews. Thereafter, data were analyzed qualitatively and mined for new meanings which emerged organically (i.e. phenomenological). Phenomenological analysis was best for this study, as it helped to test the assumptions of the researcher with the lived experiences of the participants (Padgett, 2017). This approach primarily utilized interviews with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology studies the phenomenon of interest, which is the career trajectory of MSW graduates after specialization in child welfare in this case. Through phenomenological data collection, common themes in their experiences can be found, including the situations and conditions revolving around those experiences (Padgett, 2017).

Secondary data from the gatekeeper were available to this researcher, and they have been used to provide additional demographic information. The main goal of the study was to understand the decision-making process of MSW graduates as well as their perceptions of public child welfare.

Variables

The independent variable in the research study was the child welfare specialization and Master of Social Work (MSW) education, and the dependent variables included perceptions of child welfare such as stigma, nature, respect, and blame, intent to work in child welfare, and relevant factors in the job search such as salary needs, value of supervision, risk to achieved statuses, and other factors considered in the cost-benefit analysis. Other variables were identified through phenomenological analysis.

Research Questions

The research questions were as follows:

1) What factors are considered in the career decision-making process by MSW post-graduates?

2) When making career decisions, what are MSW post-graduates' perceptions of working in public child welfare and their sources?

3) Are any of the participants' perceptions connected to social justice or injustice?

The purpose of the study is to understand factors and perceptions related to MSW graduates' career decision-making process. The investigator utilized a two-prong analytic strategy, employing phenomenological analysis and analyses based on categories derived from the literature (Padgett, 2017).

Hypotheses

The hypotheses were as follows:

1) MSW graduates with a child welfare specialization can identify factors considered during the career decision-making process.

2) MSW graduates with a child welfare specialization have an integrated perception of the public child welfare system, derived from several sources.

3) Perceptions identified by MSW graduates with a child welfare specialization will reflect a theme of social justice or injustice.

Setting

The investigator was interested in the Master of Social Work (MSW) graduate level. Thus, the investigator utilized a connection with a northeastern university, which offers graduate social work programs as well as a child welfare specialization. This program provides students with clinical and macro social work education in a culturally conscious manner to improve outcomes for children and families while ensuring child safety, permanency, and well-being. This university was the only source of data collection.

<div align="center">

Sample

</div>

As individuals entering and completing the child welfare programs, recent graduates should be provided with the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions. The sample included MSW graduates of a northeastern university with a child welfare specialization. If MSW graduates did not graduate from this specific program, then they would not qualify for participation. The child welfare specialization is available to students in both full time (two-year) and advanced standing programs, and it is open to students in clinical and macro concentrations.

This population was selected for their degree level and specialty. MSW level graduates are sought after in the public child welfare sector for their level of knowledge. The specialization also focuses on child welfare and prepares students for the public child welfare field. While there are other universities with programs that prepare students for public child welfare, the

investigator is unable to access permissions to that data. The investigator has a particular interest in the northeast. The child welfare specialization educates students in clinical and macro services to produce positive outcomes for children and families. Students are required to pursue three courses focusing on child welfare. Students not only pursue focused courses but also complete field placements that offer opportunities within the specialization.

Data were collected through purposive sampling, meaning that individuals were selected through criteria relevant to the research question and responded to a public online survey (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). In the case of purposive sampling the sample size is determined on meeting saturation (Mack et al., 2011). Saturation is the point during data collection when new data no longer shows additional insights into the research questions (Mack, et al., 2011). Samples in qualitative research are usually smaller to support the case-oriented mode of data collection (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Some researchers argue that an answer to sample size is unavailable in qualitative studies (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Others argue that the more useable the data collected from individuals, the smaller number of participants are needed (Morse, 1995). Green and Thorogood (2004) suggests that little to no new information is gained after interviewing about 20 participants. Guest et al. (2006) noted that the sample size can be smaller, such as 12, when samples are relatively homogeneous with focused research aims. Based on an article by Guest et al. (2020), findings indicate that about six interviews capture most of the themes in a homogenous sample to reach 80 percent saturation. The same article states that the practice of conducting 11 to 12 interviews would increase the degree of saturation (Guest et al., 2020).

Participants were recruited through email, with the email addresses being maintained by a gatekeeper of the program. The gatekeeper agreed to this method and shared information through these email addresses and secondary data that has been collected. The gatekeeper also shared

information through a Facebook group created for alumni of that program. The number of graduates from the program is 47 (N = 47) students since 2014. Saturation is the goal, but the researcher planned to ensure the participation of about 15 individuals, as it is a bit higher than suggested, considering that not all were interviewed. Patton (2015) states that the population (N) should be large enough to explain the objectives of the study in the case of qualitative studies. Participants did not receive any incentives for their involvement. Participants were asked, after consent, to fill out a survey and then participate in an individual interview with the researcher.

Amongst the 47 MSW graduates invited to participate, 28 percent (n = 13) completed the online survey. Fifteen percent (n = 7) participated in the follow-up interview. Twenty-one percent (n = 10) of MSW graduate emails bounced back, meaning they did not have a valid email in the system and did not receive the information to complete the survey.

In total, 15 total online surveys were started or completed. Two were started but were not completed. The small number of questions they answered were not enough to contribute to the study, so their responses were taken out of the data collection. A total of 13 MSW graduates from a northeastern school with a specialization in child welfare completed the online survey. One participant's data lacked consent; however, they completed the entire survey. After consideration, it has been assumed that participants would not complete the entire survey without the intention of consent. For the purposes of the dissertation, this response has been retained. Out of the 13 (n = 12) usable participant surveys, 7 participated in and completed a follow-up interview.

Table 1

MSW Graduates with Child Welfare Specialization Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency (*f*) (n = 47)	Percent (%)
Ethnicity		
Asian or Pacific Islander	4	9%
Black, Non-Hispanic	6	13%
Hispanic	1	2%
White, Non-Hispanic	34	72%
Multiple Race, Ethnicity	2	4%
Gender		
Female	44	94%
Male	3	6%
Degree		
MSW	47	100%
Concentration		
Clinical	38	81%
Macro	9	19%
Degree Completion		
Advanced Standing	10	21%
Full-Time	37	79%
Country of Origin		
United States	44	94%
Canada	1	2%
Israel	1	2%
China	1	2%
Age (current)		
Mean (SD)	29.64 years (2.57)	
Range	24 - 39 years	

Data Collection

The investigator collected data from graduates of the MSW program at a northeastern university with a specialization in child welfare. The investigator had access to a gatekeeper who had a list of emails for the participants that had completed the program from the northeastern university. The program director agreed to provide this information as well as secondary data that has been collected.

The survey was delivered through a self-administered online survey to the 47 alumni of the program utilizing Qualtrics. Online surveys can be beneficial because of lower cost, ease of use for participants, and a wider audience (Baker, 2012). However, risks can include hacking, lack of anonymity, and numerous security risks at the end of the survey administrator and the respondents (Baker, 2012). Baker (2012) also recommends not collecting IP addresses unless necessary, avoiding the use of tracking links, and staying away from Personal Identifiable Information (PII) such as date of birth or identification numbers. Baker (2012) also suggests that surveys should not use forced response questions, even though be a forced response question must be included, revolving around the consent statement.

A survey was sent by the gatekeeper through email to gather descriptive statistics from participants on three separate dates including October 10, November 2, and November 26, 2021. This email also made the following clear to the participants: (1) the purpose of the study, (2) the voluntary nature of participation in the study, and (3) protection of the confidentiality of the participants' names. Survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Questions were ordered, starting with broad or unthreatening topics to specific and more complex ones (Billups, 2021). The act of carefully ordering questions in this way helps to aid the process of rapport building with participants (Billups, 2021). Questions were created and reviewed based on the twenty Dillman's Principles (Dillman et al., 2009). Examples of Dillman's Principles include the following:

1. Use complete sentences to ask questions.
2. Eliminate check-all-that-apply question formats to reduce "primacy" effects.
3. Ensure each question is technically accurate.
4. Avoid double-barrel questions.

5. Avoid loading questions positively or negatively.

Questions of the survey focused more heavily on demographics and the jobs that participants have had since graduation. The purpose of this approach was to track what jobs and salaries participants have had since graduation and track if they have worked in public child welfare. Questions then touch upon perceptions of public child welfare and what intentions, if any, a participant has to work in public child welfare. The survey forms a foundation for the interview, while touching upon major themes from the literature in case a participant does not opt to engage in the follow-up interview.

Consent and Confidentiality

To ensure that participants included in the study understand the confidentiality and consent, a consent form was provided to the participant to complete if they were willing to participate in the study. The ability to end participation at any time was also noted in the consent form. The researcher used study codes on data documents and files to maintain the confidentiality of each participant. A separate document linking the study codes to the participants' identifying information was locked and stored in a separate location to which only the researcher had access. In accordance with federal guidelines, all data will be preserved by the investigator for three years and then destroyed.

Qualitative Data Collection Process

After participation in the survey, the investigator reached out, with consent from the participant, to schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted over Zoom due to the variety of geographic locations of graduates in order to accommodate participation. Phenomenological interviews are designed to understand the personal experiences of a group of individuals around

the same phenomenon (Billups, 2021). Depending on the number of participants willing to engage in an interview, the investigator considered a focus group or groups of no more than five. While saturation is met around twelve interviews, the investigator planned to continue to interview participants past that number. If MSW graduates were kind enough to respond, a forum was provided for them to speak.

The practice of building trust at the beginning of the interview was emphasized to receive honest answers from participants. Rapport can be built while explaining confidentiality, consent, context and expectations from the interview. Participants were asked if they have any questions about the interview process, confidentiality, or consent. Participants were then asked a series of questions, which will be presented in the same order for everyone, and they were asked if there is anything they want to add and requested to pose any questions at the end. These questions can be found in Appendix B. These questions have been created based on Rubin and Babbie's (2014) recommendations including open-ended questions, in a semi-structured format, using key questions to address various components of the phenomenon of interest and ending questions. Questions were created to dig deeper into participants' perceptions and what they seek in a job. Phenomenological interviews begin with broad, open-ended questions (Padgett, 2017). Questions delved deeper into perceptions of public child welfare, where they came from, and how it relates to their job search and decisions.

Qualitative data collection was video recorded over Zoom or using a recording device depending on the method of interview. These data were then transcribed and uploaded into NVivo software for data analysis. Recordings were destroyed after transcription. Identifying information was not included in the transcriptions and data were thematically reported. Some participants may have known the investigator, as the investigator is in the same field. Explicit

reference to the potential conflict of interest will be addressed in the consent agreement. To ensure that interviews were not biased by the investigator, the investigator used the pre-established questionnaire and script for each interview.

Data Collection Timeline

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted in late August 2021. The IRB was secured within a month after submission. The email survey was sent out to the sample by the beginning of October 2021. Email outreach was completed again at the beginning and end of November 2021. Interviews began by October 2021, and they were concluded by December 15, 2021. All data collection was completed by December 15, 2021.

Analysis

The software, NVivo (2021), was utilized to analyze data responses from both the online survey as well as the interviews. This software was chosen because of its capabilities to upload data and transcriptions and code and group themes. SPSS (2021) was also utilized for some of the descriptive statistic data that will be collected. Transcripts were reviewed for key statements, quotes, contexts, and analysis of each participant's accounts of their lived experiences (Padgett, 2017).

Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted through Zoom due to geographic distance and COVID-19 pandemic risks. The overall interview experience was positive for the investigator (Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2017). Participants were supportive upon seeing a fellow social worker conducting research and expressed this sentiment after the interviews had been completed. During few instances, a participant was late or faced a technical issue, but these instances were

resolved rather quickly. The investigator ensured that the participants had contact information in case questions needed to be posed after the interview.

Data were analyzed to better understand how MSW graduates experience the phenomenon, creating an "essence meaning" (Billups, 2021). The investigator identified, analyzed, and synthesized significant statements to create the essence statement. Recorded interview data was transformed into a file along with transcription of the interviews. Analysis of the interviews followed the four phases established by Billups (2021) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Quantitative Data Analysis Process

Step Number	Step	Description
1	Raw data management	• Cleaning data, reviewing transcripts and notes, and making sense of data (Billups, 2021) • Scrubbing the data for identifying information (Padgett, 2017)
2	Data reduction	• Creating preliminary codes and categories to sort data (Billups, 2021)
3	Data analysis and interpretation	• Analyzing data to tell a story and represent an experience (Billups, 2021)
4	Data Representation	• Taking analyzed data and creating findings that create the scope for conclusions and recommendations (Billups, 2021)

The recordings were transcribed word for word. Following the transcription, the interviews were reviewed in comparison to the transcription for accuracy. Identifying information, such as names, agencies, and university, was removed. After the transcripts were

reviewed for a second time, they were uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program used for coding and analysis. Once uploaded to NVivo, transcripts were coded based on the questions asked during the interviews and survey. After this first preliminary analysis, the interviewer went deeper into the coding on the second round. Statements were reviewed to identify patterns, factors, definitions, and themes. Data was also analyzed for emerging statements or unique findings. Codes were reviewed by secondary coders. Changes were made to codes based on the insights provided.

The investigator utilized SPSS to run descriptive statistics, identifying categories of ethnicity, gender, concentration, current job type, experience in public child welfare or not, and year of graduation with their MSW. The investigator also utilized SPSS to calculate mean and range of respondents' age. These findings are summarized in Table 3 and Table 6.

Reflexivity Statement

In conducting this research, I, Abigail Wilson, believe that my position as a white, United States citizen, well-educated female provides me with privileges others may not have. I understand that this privilege, my education, and employment shapes my biases and interpretations. My knowledge of MSW education, child welfare specialization, the job search, and public child welfare is vast. I have my MSW degree and a child welfare specialization. As an MSW, I have searched for jobs and understand factors that influenced my own decisions in accepting a job offer. I have been studying and working with and around public child welfare since 2014. In my current role, I work with private providers that contract with public child welfare agencies and meet with staff working for the county and state public child welfare system in Pennsylvania.

At my place of employment, I consistently hear about the difficulty in recruiting and retaining well prepared staff. In these conversations, it is often stated by many that MSW graduates are the best suited for the job. As an MSW graduate, I know how I felt about working for the public child welfare sector. This personal experience affects the way in which I think about the topic, as I have my own beliefs around the phenomenon of interest. I also understand that because I know some of the potential participants, this may affect the responses received during the interview as well as the participants' comfort level.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to recruit study participants was obtained by the Northeastern University and Millersville University's Institutional Review Board, IRB protocol no. 853984854. Informed consent was an ongoing process as there were multiple layers to the study, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Study participants were assigned an identification number to maintain confidentiality as well as a pseudonym (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Study participants were also informed that the university and specific program would not be named but referred to as a northeastern university and a child welfare specialization. Participants were also informed that it might be possible to identify who was interviewed for the study based on their reported experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the researcher, two Millersville faculty members had access to the survey and the interview data that was collected. Data was stored for the study in a password protected computer.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

The results in this chapter have been derived from the data collected in the online survey as well as individual interviews. All interviewees also completed a survey. This chapter will provide and share the results of the analysis, including demographics, interview participants, and qualitative answers from the online survey and individual interviews. The data provides insight into factors the MSW graduates consider during their job search, their perceptions of public child welfare, and the decision-making process. The following three main research questions were considered in this section:

1) What factors are considered in the career decision-making process by MSW post-graduates?

2) When making career decisions, what are MSW post-graduates' perceptions of working in public child welfare and their sources?

3) Are any of the participants' perceptions connected to social justice or injustice?

Demographics

Survey Participants

Participants in the survey tended to be white women with a micro concentration in social work as students. The demographic statistics for survey group participants are displayed in Table 3. Eighty-five percent of survey respondents (two men, nine women) were white. Fifteen percent of survey respondents (two women) were black. Eight percent of respondents self-identified as Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. The average age was 30.61 years (SD = 3.07, age range: 25 -

39 years). Sixty-two percent of the participants had a micro concentration (clinical), and 38

percent had a macro concentration (research, policy, or leadership) as students. Sixty-two percent

reported that their current job was in their concentration, 30 percent reported their current job

was not in their concentration, and 8 percent were unsure. Thirty-eight percent reported that they

have worked in the public child welfare sector, with 23 percent indicating that public child

welfare was their first job after graduation. Eight percent (n = 1) of the participants still work in

public child welfare. Eighty-five percent of participants were undecided as to whether they

would work for public child welfare in the future.

Table 3

Survey Participant Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency (*f*) (n = 13)	Percent (%)
Race		
White	11	85%
African American	2	15%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish Origin	1	8%
Not Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish Origin	12	92%
Gender		
Male	2	15%
Female	11	85%
Concentration		
Micro	8	62%
Macro	5	38%
Current Job in Concentration		
Yes	8	62%
No	4	30%
Unsure	1	8%
Age		
Mean (SD)	30.61 (3.07)	
Range	25 - 39	
Worked in PCW		

Yes	5	38%
No	8	62%
First Job in PCW		
Yes	3	23%
No	10	77%
Currently Work in PCW		
Yes	1	8%
No	12	92%
Would Work at PCW in Future		
Yes	0	0%
No	2	15%
Undecided	11	85%
Year Graduated		
2015	1	8%
2016	7	53%
2017	3	23%
2019	1	8%
2020	1	8%

Table 4

Participant Basic Profile

Participant	Completed Survey	Completed Interview	Current Agency	Current Title	Current Salary (Annual)
1	Yes	Yes	Case Management Organization	Systems and Data Analyst	$53,000
2	Yes	Yes	Outpatient Cancer Center	Social Worker	$82,000
3	Yes	No	Non-profit, Focus on Children and Families	Grants Manager	$48,000
4	Yes	No	Community Based Program	Career Readiness for Adults	$41,000
5	Yes	No	Non-profit	Volunteer Supervisor	$40,000

6	Yes	Yes	Intensive Early Intervention Program	Clinical Therapist	$62,000
7	Yes	Yes	School-based Program/Transitional Foster Care with Unaccompanied Minors	Clinician	$63,000
8	Yes	No	Non-Profit	Advocate Manager	$50,000
9	Yes	Yes	Technical/Vocational High School	Social Worker	$97,350
10	Yes	Yes	N/A, Student	Student	N/A, Student
11	Yes	No	Research Institution focused on Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice	Policy Analyst	$87,000
12	Yes	No	Non-Profit	Domestic Violence Educator	$42,000
13	Yes	Yes	Private Practice	School Social Worker and Child/Adolescent Therapist	$79,000

Table 4 shows the basic profile of each participant in the survey. Table 4 also shows whether survey participants went on to complete an individual interview, their generalized current agency, generalized current title, and current salary.

Table 5 breaks down the positions in public child welfare that survey participants identified that they would consider, if any, to understand positions in which they may potentially be interested. Eighty-five percent of participants indicated they would consider a job in public

child welfare, with fifteen percent reporting they would consider none. No participants were willing to take on a caseworker or a direct service role. Thirty-eight percent of participants may consider a supervisor position. Forty-six percent of participants would consider a manager position. Forty-six percent of participants would consider an administrator position. Thirty-eight percent of participants would consider a state-level position in public child welfare. Fifteen percent of participants selected "other" as a position that they would take, but these participants could not report what that position would be.

Table 5

MSW Graduates' Potential Positions of Interest in Public Child Welfare

Participant	Public Child Welfare Job
1	Administrator, State-Level Position
2	Supervisor, Manager, Administrator
3	Administrator
4	Manager
5	Supervisor, Manager, State-Level Position
6	None
7	Supervisor, Manager
8	Supervisor, Manager, Administrator, State-Level Position, Other
9	Supervisor, State-Level Position
10	State-Level Position, Other: Unsure at this time
11	Administrator, State-Level Position
12	None
13	Manager, Administrator

Interview Participants

Interview participants tended to be white females with a micro concentration as students. Demographic statistics, as shown in Table 6, for interview participants are displayed in Table 4. All interview participants completed the online survey. One hundred percent of interview participants (two male, five female) were white with 14 percent identifying as Hispanic, Latinx,

or Spanish origin. Interview participants had a mean age of 31.29 (SD = 3.50, age range: 29 -

39). Eighty-six percent of participants had a micro concentration as students. Fifty-seven percent

have their current job in this concentration. Forty-three percent have worked in public child

welfare with 0 percent currently working in public child welfare. For 14 percent of participants,

public child welfare was their first job after graduation. Eighty-six percent of participants are

undecided as to whether they would ever work for public child welfare in the future.

Table 6

Interview Participant Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency (*f*) (n = 7)	Percent (%)
Race		
White	7	100%
African American	0	0%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish Origin	1	14%
Not Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish Origin	6	86%
Gender		
Male	2	28%
Female	5	72%
Concentration		
Micro	6	86%
Macro	1	14%
Current Job in Concentration		
Yes	4	57%
No	3	43%
Age		
Mean (SD)	31.29 (3.50)	
Range	29 - 39	
Worked in PCW		
Yes	3	43%
No	4	57%
First Job in PCW		
Yes	1	14%
No	6	86%
Currently Work in PCW		

Yes	0	0%
No	7	100%
Would Work at PCW in Future		
Yes	0	0%
No	1	14%
Undecided	6	86%
Year Graduated		
2015	1	14%
2016	5	72%
2017	1	14%
2019	0	0%
2020	0	0%

Summary of Descriptive Statistics

Majority of the participants are white females with a micro (clinical) concentration. Majority of the participants have not worked in public child welfare and currently do not work in public child welfare. The mean age of all participants is about 30 years old. Majority of participants are undecided as to whether they would work in public child welfare in the future. None (0 percent) of the participants participated in a program similar to the Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL) program, an educational opportunity at the graduate level where students receive financial assistance with a contractual obligation to continue employment with public child welfare after graduation.

The theoretical framework displayed in Chapter 1 depicts the initial Figure 1, proposing the theoretical decision-making process of MSW graduates, and it has been reproduced in Figure 2. Under factors, demographics are summarized in the quantitative analysis previous section. Some assigned and achieved statuses are included in the summary of demographics. Some are discussed further in this qualitative results section. The data in this section have been collected in

the online survey as well as individual interviews. The results begin to fill in the dimensions of

the theoretical framework from Chapter 1.

Figure 2

MSW Graduate Job Factors and Decision-making Theoretical Framework

Factors	MSW Graduates Decision Making	Job
• Demographics • Assigned and Achieved Statuses • Symbols and Meanings • Theory: SI, OCC	• RCT and Exchange Theory	• Public Child Welfare • Child Welfare
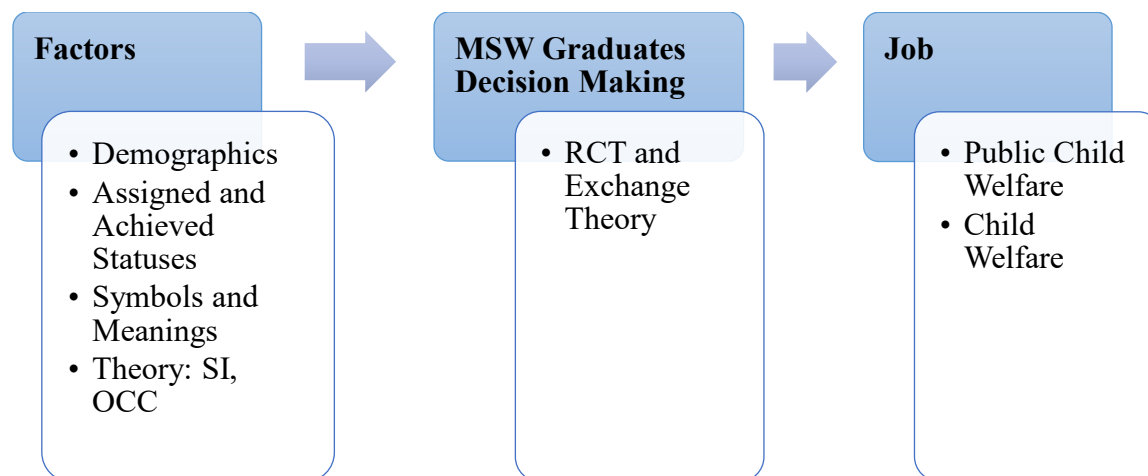
Summary of Qualitative Findings

Based on qualitative data and collected information from demographics and the

participants' basic profiles, there are additions to the 'Job' category on the conceptualized figure.

These additions are shown in Figure 3. One participant indicated that they returned to school

after understanding that there are gaps in their learning. Throughout this section, the figure will

reflect the participants' answers to questions in both the online survey and individual interviews.

These results begin to fill in the dimensions of the theoretical framework.

Figure 3

MSW Graduate Job Factors and Decision-making with Job

Factors		MSW Graduates Decision Making		Job
• Demographics • Assigned and Achieved Statuses • Symbols and Meanings • Theory: SI, OCC	→	• RCT and Exchange Theory	→	• Public Child Welfare • Child Welfare • Other • Degree or Further Education
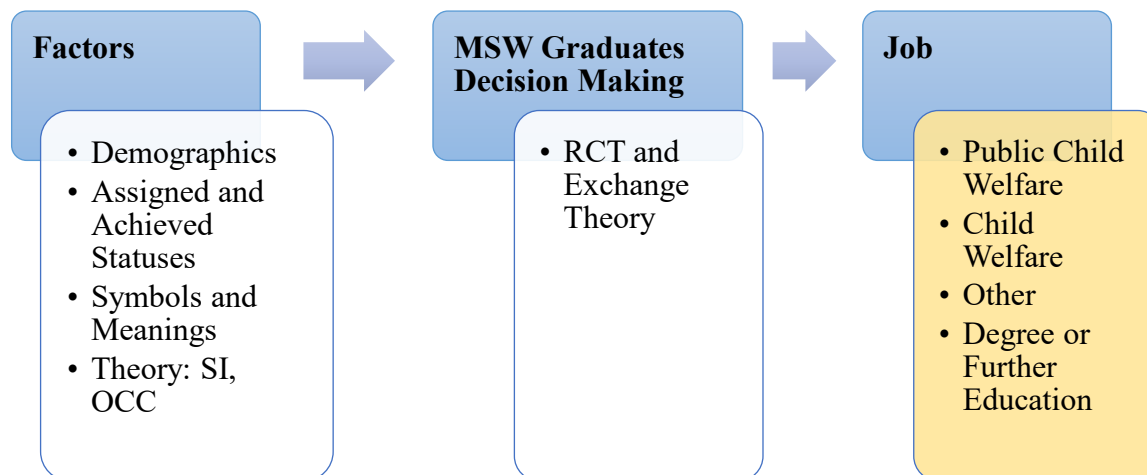
Child Welfare Specialization

Online survey participants were asked to report their motivations for completing the child welfare specialization as well as their experiences in the specialization. This helps to understand if there was a plan to work in public child welfare, or if graduates associate this experience in a positive or negative way. This section relates to research questions 2 as perceptions may form during the child welfare specialization programming. The factors include specialization appeal and experience.

Specialization Appeal

Participants in the survey (n = 13) identified their motivation for completing the specialization in child welfare, as shown in Table 7. Many felt it was beneficial to their learning and that it would help them better understand and support children and child welfare. Participants expressed their interest in working in the child welfare sector or with children in general. This was identified as a passion area. Participants wanted to learn more about research and policy around child welfare. Participant 9 shared that they were, "passionate about helping children succeed and flourish and wanted to gain more insight into the child welfare system."

Table 7

MSW Graduate Child Welfare Specialization Appeal

Participant	Specialization Appeal
1	Out of the specializations offered, child development was the most interesting, and I had been considering a career path in child behavioral interventions/child welfare.
2	I felt it was beneficial to specialize and focus on a particular area of social work, both for my interest and future professional career.
3	I was interested in using my MSW to work with children/families.
4	Wanting to get a wider view of how I could support children in my practice.
5	Wanted to gain a larger understand of child welfare, specifically around policy and program management.
6	Coursework aligned with my interests.
7	I wanted to complete something that would further my concentration in working with children that are involved in multi-systems.
8	I had a history of working in child advocacy and wanted to bring that experience to working in the child welfare field.
9	Passionate about helping children succeed and flourish and wanted to gain more insight into the child welfare system.
10	I worked at a residential prior with children and families and wanted to deepen my understanding of the policies and treatments focused on children and family wellbeing.
11	My career goals were specific to child welfare research and policy going into the MSW program; the specialization was a way to focus my courses on those topics, as well as receive some clinical instruction.
12	Wanted to work with children in school settings.
13	Want to support a fellow social worker in their research.

Specialization Experience

Survey participants (n = 13) shared their experience in the child welfare specialization as shown in Table 8. Graduates mostly enjoyed the specialization or identified it was a positive experience. Participants shared it was informative, geographically oriented, and foster care focused. Participant 13 shared, "I learned a lot and found the program to be very valuable in terms of preparing me for my career."

Table 8

MSW Graduate Child Welfare Specialization Experience

Participant	Specialization Experience
1	Interesting although altogether average – the classes were good, but my field placement was with older teenagers rather with children, and I did not actually get to practice the way I wanted to – I acted more as a back-up case manager rather than utilizing any skills I was learning in the classes. However, the school itself was fine.
2	I thoroughly enjoyed it! I worked in foster care prior to attending graduate school and my first year placement was with an agency that worked with youth aging out of foster care. All of that combined, I felt that I could apply my "real world" experience with the academic side of it.
3	Overall positive
4	Fair
5	Informative, geographically-oriented, I gained a solid foundation in policy. I graduated may 2020 so I may not have had a complete experience due to COVID
6	Enjoyed working/learning with peers across multiple courses
7	Somewhat positive
8	It prepared me well for understanding the history of child welfare, policy and macro level problems in the field.
9	Great experience! Loved the specialized classes and attending the conference.
10	I enjoyed the courses and faculty.
11	Positive

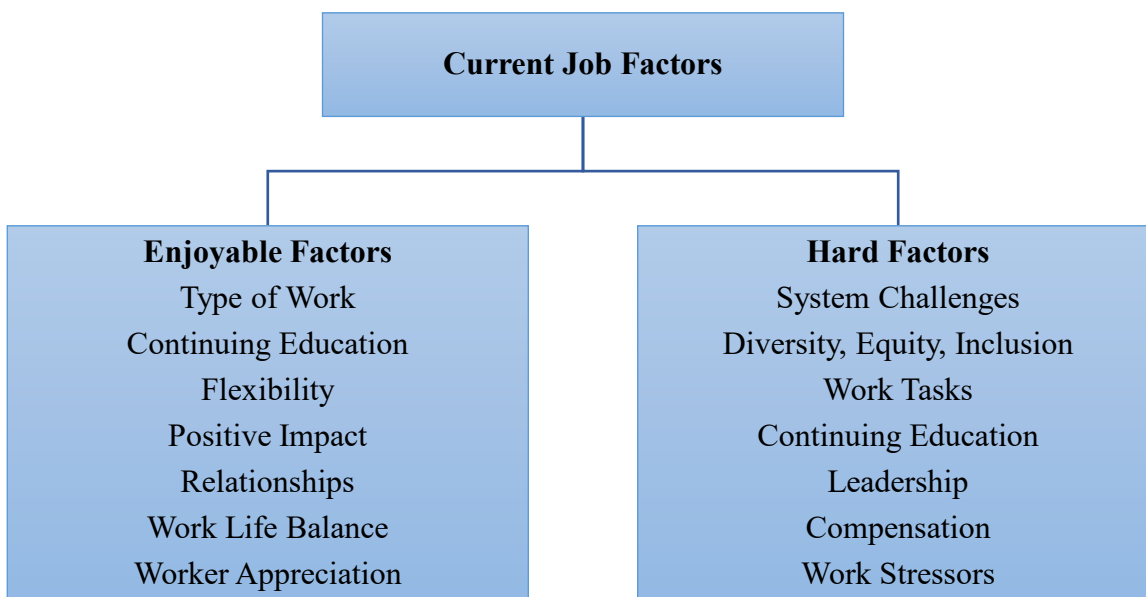| 12 | Foster Care focused |
| 13 | Excellent – I learned a lot and found the program to be very valuable in terms of preparing me for my career. |

Experience since Graduation

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to share their experiences in the field of social work since graduation. The population they worked with at their jobs comprised an area of emphasis. This may have been because participants understood that the research was focusing on child welfare work. For some, the descriptions of the jobs they have had were connected to emotions and aspirations. For example, one participant shared, "my overall views is that we're overworked and underpaid." Participants shared some reasoning behind transitioning from one job to another or identified areas they wanted to learn such as languages or skills.

Current Job

Survey participants were asked to identify their current jobs as well as factors that made the job enjoyable or hard. In asking participants about their current jobs, comparisons can be drawn to their perceptions of a job in public child welfare. The factors that are enjoyable and hard have been displayed in Figure 4. This section directly relates to research question number one. Question 1 asks what factors are considered in the decision-making process, and some factors come from looking at where graduates are now. The most identified enjoyable factors include type of work and positive impact, whereas hard factors include system challenges and work tasks.

Figure 4

MSW Graduate Current Enjoyable and Hard Job Factors

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │   Current Job Factors   │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
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Enjoyable Factors	Hard Factors
Type of Work	System Challenges
Continuing Education	Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
Flexibility	Work Tasks
Positive Impact	Continuing Education
Relationships	Leadership
Work Life Balance	Compensation
Worker Appreciation	Work Stressors

Enjoyable Factors

Participants from the online survey (n=13) identified factors about their current job that they enjoy. The factors identified include the type of work, continuing education, flexibility, positive impact, relationships, work-life balance, and worker appreciation, as shown in Table 9.

Type of Work. The type of work nine (69.23 percent) MSW graduates do are important and enjoyable for them. These participants enjoy working with children, community work, independent work, macro work, and therapeutic work.

Continuing Education. One (7.69 percent) graduate described that they enjoyed "classes and clinical placements," which allowed them to continue to learn.

Flexibility. Two (15.38 percent) participants shared that they enjoyed flexibility in their work, including the way in which they exerted their time and energy, and the "ability to work within many systems."

Positive Impact. Three (23.08 percent) MSW graduates described that they enjoyed the ability to make a positive impact whether that be with individuals they serve, "translating research into policy solutions," or engaging in preventive services.

Relationships. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate shared that they enjoyed the relationships that they formed at their job.

Work Life Balance. A "healthy work/life balance" is an enjoyable factor of one current job for an (7.69 percent) MSW graduate.

Worker Appreciation. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate identified that they enjoy feeling "valued" and having "support from management."

Hard Factors

Online survey participants (n = 13) were asked to identify factors that made their current job hard. The factors identified included system challenges, diversity, equity, and inclusion, work tasks, continuing education, leadership, compensation, and work stressors, as shown in Table 9.

System Challenges. There are phenomena outside of the control of four (30.77 percent) participants, which make their current job hard. This includes the "child welfare crisis," working with government, lack of resources for children and families, and "working within systems that are broken and don't necessarily put children first."

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The inability to "inspire change within the organization," in particular around diversity and inclusion, made one (7.69 percent) participant's current job hard.

Work Tasks. Five (38.46 percent) participants identified work tasks that made their current job hard. These tasks include managing funding, balancing requirements, and balancing workload. One participant felt that the job "doesn't fully match what I can do in the long run," thereby indicating that another job may be a better fit for their skills or goals. Another participant highlighted the difficulty in navigating behavior, trauma, and the instability of many family-specific situations.

Continuing Education. The lack of training or understanding of the background of the job made it hard for one (7.69%) MSW graduate.

Leadership. Leadership was identified as a factor, which made one (7.69 percent) participant's current job hard.

Compensation. The feeling of being "under paid" made the job hard for one (7.69 percent) participant.

Work Stressors. Two (15.38 percent) MSW graduates identified that work stressors can make their current jobs hard. Work stressors can include feeling "overworked," and stressed as well as secondary trauma.

Table 9

MSW Graduate Current Job Enjoyable and Hard Factors by Participant

Participant	Enjoyable Factors	Hard Factors
1	Type of Work	Continuing Education

2	Relationships, Type of Work	Work Stressors
3	Type of Work	Work Tasks
4	N/A	Work Tasks
5	Type of Work	Compensation, System Challenges, Work Stressors
6	Type of Work	Work Tasks
7	Type of Work	System Challenges
8	Flexibility, Positive Impact, Work Life Balance, Worker Appreciation	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
9	Type of Work	System Challenges
10	Continuing Education	Work Tasks
11	Positive Impact, Type of Work	Work Tasks
12	Type of Work	Leadership
13	Flexibility, Positive Impact	System Challenges

Factors of Job Search

By inquiring about the factors that MSW graduates find important about the job search, the results begin to highlight the cost-benefit and the rational choices behind considering a job. Both online survey and individual interview participants answered questions related to factors involved in the job search. These factors are added to the theoretical framework model as shown in Figure 5. This section related directly to research question one. Online survey participants identified main factors of compensation, organizational culture, and opportunities for growth and work tasks. Interview participants identified the main factors of organizational culture, compensation, and opportunity for growth.

Figure 5

MSW Graduate Decision-making in Job Search
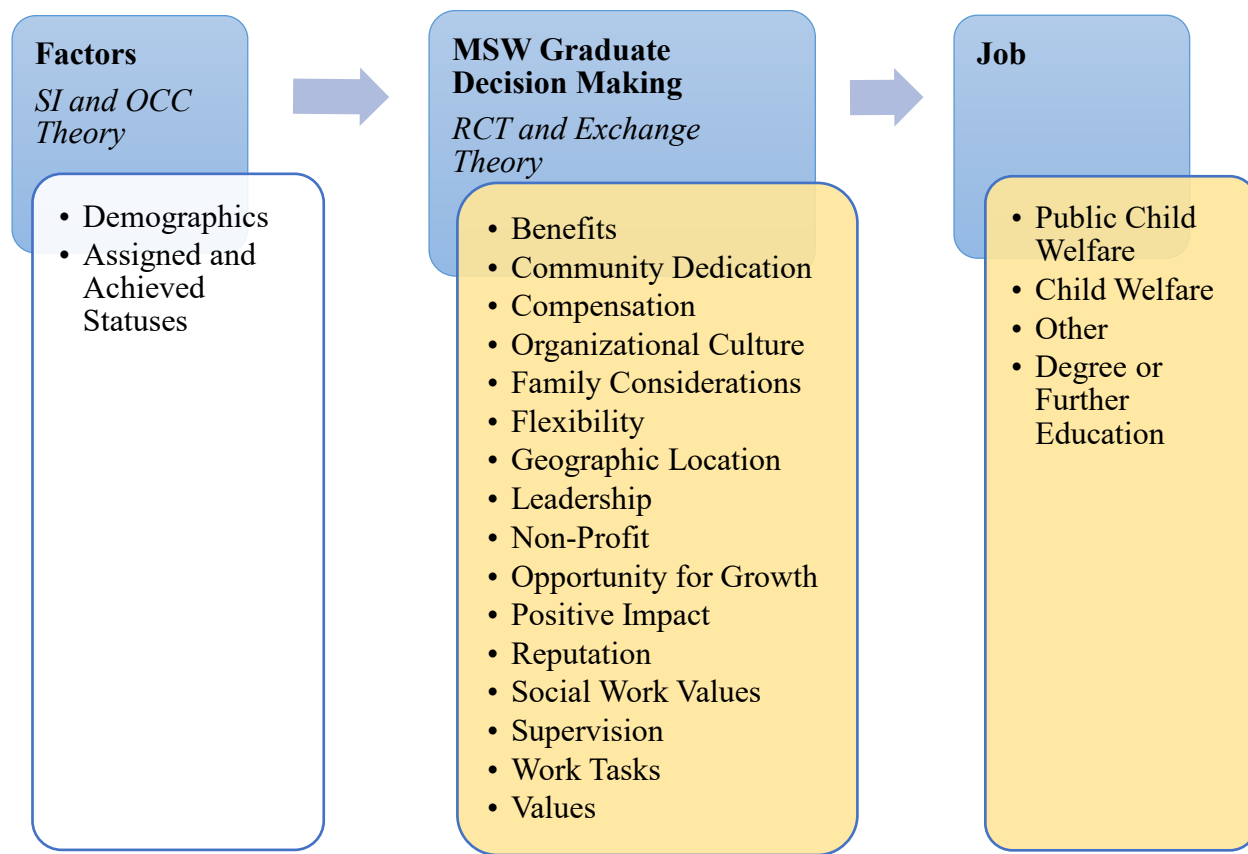
Important Factors in Online Survey

Online survey participants (n = 13) identified factors important to them when searching for a job. The factors included benefits, compensation, organizational culture, flexibility, geographic location, leadership, opportunity for growth, positive impact, reputation, social work values, supervision, work tasks, and values, as shown in Table 10.

Benefits. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate considers the "benefits" offered at an agency during the job search.

Compensation. Salary is an important factor in the job search for five (38.46 percent) MSW graduates. This was described in multiple narratives by MSW graduates.

Organizational Culture. Five (38.46 percent) MSW graduates identified "work culture" as an important factor in the job search. According to these graduates, there should be a positive work environment, and good staff morale should be maintained.

Flexibility. Two (15.38 percent) MSW graduates seek flexibility in the job itself as well as a "flexible schedule" when searching for a job.

Geographic Location. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate identified that the "commute from home" is an important factor when searching for a job.

Leadership. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate described that they look for "support and respect from management" when searching for a job. They also look for strong leadership, in general, as they consider a potential job.

Opportunity for Growth. Four (30.77 percent) MSW graduates are looking for an opportunity for advancement and promotion. They are looking for both "career development and growth opportunities."

Positive Impact. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate looks for the ability to "effect positive change" during the job search.

Reputation. The "community reputation" of the agency is important to one (7.69 percent) MSW graduate when searching for a job.

Social Work Values. Two (15.38 percent) MSW graduates shared that the "value of the role of the social work role" is important to them during the job search. This entails the idea of

not only hiring a social worker but also valuing and respecting the role or title protection. They also look for alignment of the job and tasks to social work values.

Supervision. The idea that there should be supportive staff in the agency is important to two (15.38 percent) MSW graduates. There should also be a "supervisor I can turn to at any point for support."

Work Tasks. Four (30.77 percent) MSW graduates value challenges in their work but do not seek pressures of decision-making positions. Another MSW graduate described that they seek an up-to-date approach and view of child behavior. Another MSW graduate has an "awareness of the mountains of paperwork" at a potential job. An MSW graduate is looking forward to being able to practice both therapy and medication management. Another MSW graduate seeks relevant policy and research focus within a potential job. A survey participant shared that they look for the ability to work alone in a potential job.

Values. The mission, vision, and values of an agency is an important factor in the job search for three (23.08 percent) MSW graduates. The idea that the agency and job itself is in an area that the graduate is passionate about is important. An MSW graduate described agency "dedication to the community" as an important factor to consider in the job search.

Important Factors in Interview

Interview participants (n = 7) identified factors important to them when searching for a job. Factors identified included benefits, organizational culture, compensation, family consideration, geographic location, opportunity for growth, leadership, non-profit, reputation, social work values, supervision, work tasks, and values, as shown in Table 10.

Benefits. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate identified that "health insurance" and benefits are an important factor in the job search.

Organizational Culture. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates identified healthy "work culture" and "organizational factors" as important factors in the job search.

Compensation. Five (71.43 percent) MSW graduates seek a "stable salary" and "pay increase" opportunities during the job search.

Family Consideration. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate shared that they consider their family in the job search. As they have children of their own, they are looking for appropriate and flexible scheduling to match their family.

Geographic Location. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates consider location as an important factor in the job search. One graduate went back to school for another degree and identified that they specifically looked for a "virtual job."

Opportunity for Growth. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates identified opportunities for growth as an important factor to them. This can include "mobility," gaining clinical hours, free continuing education, opportunities to supervise others, creativity in a job, and ability to move up the ladder into administrative work.

Leadership. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate described that they consider the management and "leadership" of an agency when they are engaged in a job search.

Non-profit. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates consider working for a non-profit to be an important factor because of student loans. One graduate identified that they needed to stay within the non-profit world in the hopes that they will eventually pay off their student loans. A

participant shared, "there's no way I can pay my loans, so I have to stay in that world where hopefully they'll pay off my loans."

Reputation. One (14.28 percent) MSW student looks at the "community perception" of the agency while searching for a job.

Social Work Values. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate considers social work values to be an important factor in the job search. They want a workplace that is "aligned to social work values" and treats both staff and clients with "dignity" and "respect."

Supervision. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate seeks opportunities for supervision when searching for a job.

Values. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates look at the values of an agency as an important factor in the job search. This includes the agency's perspective and the "values and ethics" of the organization.

Work Tasks. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate considers the tasks of the job as an important factor. This includes interventions utilized and the task of visiting a client's home. For example, "if you're going into homes that's like another something else that I definitely take into consideration."

Combined Important Job Factors

While this code was considered separately between the online survey and the interview, it has been considered as one code here to identify any similarities or differences, which has been shown in Table 10. When reviewed, most of the identified important factors in both the interview and the survey were the same with some variations. Factors that are the same include benefits,

compensation, organizational culture, geographic location, opportunity for growth, leadership, reputation, social work values, supervision, values, and work tasks. Survey participants also identified flexibility and positive impact. Interview participants identified family considerations and being a non-profit as factors important to them. Table 9 breaks down the survey and interview answers. This table also combines answers across survey and interview answers. Largely, the factors are the same and suggest that the results will be the same regardless of the method of data collection.

Table 10

MSW Graduate Important Job Factors

Participant	Survey Factors	Interview Factors	Both Interview and Survey
1	Work Tasks	Organizational Culture, Nonprofit	Work Tasks, Organizational Culture, Nonprofit
2	Organizational Culture, Social Work Values, Geographic Location, Reputation, Compensation	Compensation, Organizational Culture, Opportunity for Growth, Reputation, Values	Compensation, Organizational Culture, Opportunity for Growth, Social Work Values, Geographic Location, Reputation, Values
3	Organizational Culture, Values	NA	Organizational Culture, Values
4	Compensation, Work Tasks	NA	Compensation, Work Tasks
5	Organizational Culture, Supervision	NA	Organizational Culture, Supervision
6	Values, Work Tasks	Organizational Culture, Family Considerations, Geographic Location, Values	Values, Work Tasks, Organizational Culture, Family Considerations, Geographic Location

7	Compensation, Values, Supervision, Opportunity for Growth	Compensation, Nonprofit, Opportunity for Growth	Compensation, Opportunity for Growth, Supervision, Nonprofit, Values
8	Leadership, Organizational Culture, Flexibility, Positive Impact, Opportunity for Growth	NA	Leadership, Organizational Culture, Flexibility, Positive Impact, Opportunity for Growth
9	Compensation, Flexibility, Organizational Culture	Compensation, Leadership, Work Tasks	Compensation, Flexibility, Organizational Culture, Leadership, Work Tasks
10	Work Tasks	Benefits, Compensation, Geographic Location, Opportunity for Growth, Supervision	Work Tasks, Benefits, Compensation, Geographic Location, Opportunity for Growth, Supervision
11	Compensation, Benefits, Opportunity for Growth, Leadership	NA	Compensation, Benefits, Opportunity for Growth, Leadership
12	Leadership, Opportunity for Growth	NA	Leadership, Opportunity for Growth
13	Leadership, Opportunity for Growth, Social Work Values	Compensation, Organizational Culture, Social Work Values	Leadership, Opportunity for Growth, Social Work Values, Compensation, Organizational Culture

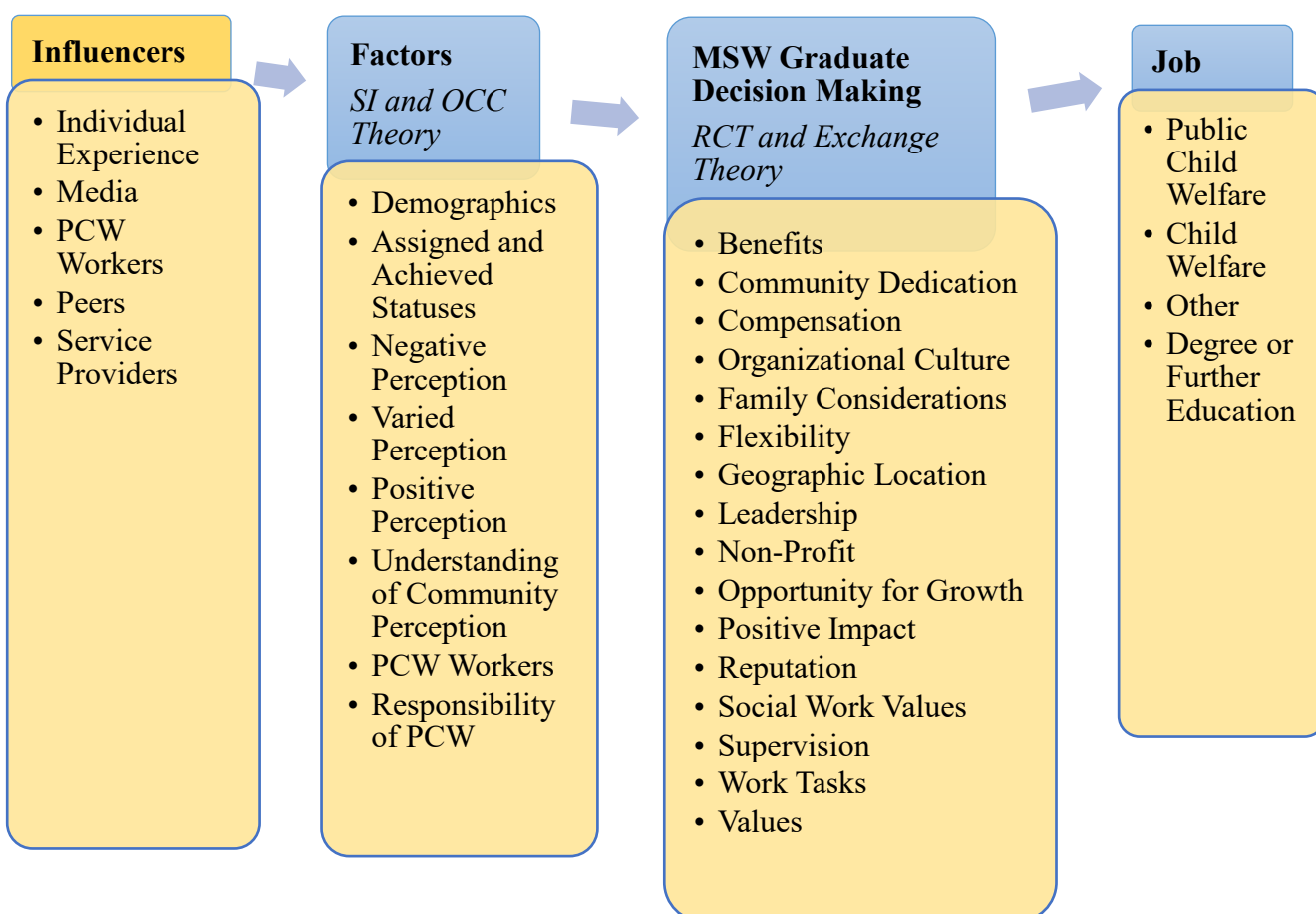**Perceptions of Public Child Welfare**

This section relates to research question two as asking participants questions related to the perceptions of public child welfare can help to understand the symbols and meanings attached to the public child welfare system through the lived experiences of respondents. Both online survey participants and individual interview participants were asked to share their

perceptions of public child welfare as well as what they believe has influenced those perceptions. These factors have been added to the theoretical framework, as shown in Figure 6. Individual experience and peers were indicated as main influencers in the perceptions of public child welfare. The majority of messages heard by MSW graduates were negative. Survey participants, therefore, identified a negative perception of public child welfare. Interview participants also identified a negative view of public child welfare, with a varied perception as a close second.

Figure 6

MSW Job Search with Factors and Influencers

Influencers
- Individual Experience
- Media
- PCW Workers
- Peers
- Service Providers

Factors
SI and OCC Theory
- Demographics
- Assigned and Achieved Statuses
- Negative Perception
- Varied Perception
- Positive Perception
- Understanding of Community Perception
- PCW Workers
- Responsibility of PCW

MSW Graduate Decision Making
RCT and Exchange Theory
- Benefits
- Community Dedication
- Compensation
- Organizational Culture
- Family Considerations
- Flexibility
- Geographic Location
- Leadership
- Non-Profit
- Opportunity for Growth
- Positive Impact
- Reputation
- Social Work Values
- Supervision
- Work Tasks
- Values

Job
- Public Child Welfare
- Child Welfare
- Other
- Degree or Further Education

Influencers

Influencers are individuals or experiences who have influenced the perception of MSW graduates. Interview participants (n = 7) were asked what they believed influenced their perception of public child welfare. This portion of the results speaks directly to the research questions and constitutes new findings, as shown in Figure 6. The influencers indicated by participants include individual experience, media, PCW workers, peers, and service providers, as shown in Table 11.

Individual Experience. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates reported that their experiences influenced their perception of public child welfare. These experiences comprised interactions with public child welfare workers or those being served by the public child welfare system. One participant described, "being the person that has to go into a mother's, a new mother that just had a baby's room to say that we need to call *(public child welfare)* for X reason and seeing their reaction…"

Media. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates identified that the news media influences their perception of public child welfare. One participant described seeing news articles where kids fall through the cracks and bad things happen to them. For example, "a couple things happened in *(locations)* um where you know kids kind of fell through the cracks."

Public Child Welfare Workers. Two (28.57%) MSW graduates reported that workers in the public child welfare system influence their perception of public child welfare. Workers identified in interviews included caseworkers, "terrible person on the hotline," peers that worked in public child welfare, and other individuals working directly in the system.

Peers. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates shared that their perception of public child welfare is influenced by their peers, specifically coworkers, "word of mouth," and other individuals they worked with.

Service Providers. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate reported that service providers influence their perception of public child welfare. Service providers are those who do not directly represent public child welfare but provide similar services or contract with the state to provide services.

Messages

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to share the things that they heard about working in the public child welfare field before they became a professional social worker. They were asked to share what those messages had been. Participants reported that messages were little messages, individual experiences, media, negative messages, and risks of work, as shown in Table 11.

Individual Experience. One (14.28 percent) participant reported that while working in a previous job, they witnessed and were traumatized by how young people were treated by a professional in public child welfare. A participant shared, "I was so traumatized by what I witnessed and how the young people were treated."

Little Messages. One (14.28 percent) participant shared that they did not have much exposure to public child welfare before they became a social worker. They may have heard a few messages about family situations such as, "what you hear and like what you hear about the kids in the school or what you hear about their family situations."

Media. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates reported that media influenced their perceptions of public child welfare workers. One participant shared the example of the show Law and Order SVU, where they portray public child welfare workers as a "villain" or very ineffective. Another graduate described how they heard about the "negatives" of public child welfare workers in a rap song when they were younger. The song had a part that said something about social workers "taking their kids away."

Negative Messages. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates stated that the messages they heard created negative perceptions about public child welfare. For example, they heard messages that child welfare workers took children away or ripped them from their homes. Other messages were that it is a hard job, and that they will experience burnout or feel overworked. One participant reported that there is a lack of support or consideration for mental health from supervisors. One MSW graduate heard that public child welfare is a punitive system. For example, "it's difficult more because the high stress of it and long hours and just the mental toll that it can take being exposed to all different levels of you know other people's trauma through you."

Risks of Work. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate shared that they had heard "horror stories" of public child welfare workers getting "stabbed" when visiting a home or experiencing threats being directed toward them.

MSW Perceptions Survey

Survey participants (n = 13) were asked to share their perceptions of public child welfare. Participants identified negative perception, varied perception, public child welfare workers, and responsibilities, as shown in Table 11.

Negative Perception. Twelve (92.31 percent) MSW graduates' perceptions are that the system is broken, inconsistent, there is poor management, the system is in constant crisis, outcomes for children are poor, the system is unpopular with families, and that is is not great, in general. On participant stated, "the system is unpopular with families, caseworker positions are underfunded, and outcomes for children are poor."

Public Child Welfare Workers. Three (23.08 percent) MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare workers are that they lack appreciation and that they are overworked, and employees are underpaid. A participant shared that public child welfare workers were "very inconsistent with respect to how cases are handled/treated."

Responsibilities. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate shared that they perceive the responsibilities of public child welfare to contribute to the ineffectiveness. They believe that administrators make decisions that do not benefit clients. Public child welfare agencies have too much autonomy to conduct services, leading to differences in different geographic locations. Public child welfare should employ leaders in the field, and workers should have a social work or similar degree. A participant shared, "I believe there is really great work happening at community based NPO's, but I feel that the overarching system of *(public child welfare)* is not a leader in public child welfare."

Varied Perception. One (7.69 percent) MSW graduate shared they believe that public child welfare is "well intentioned, but under-funded and overburdened."

MSW Perceptions Interview

MSW graduates in the interview (n = 7) were asked about their perception of public child welfare. Participants identified negative perception, varied perception, positive perception, public child welfare workers, and responsibilities, as shown in Table 11.

Negative Perception. Six (85.71 percent) MSW graduates identified negative perceptions of public child welfare. An MSW graduate's perception was that people in public child welfare get overworked and experience burnout easily. MSW graduates shared that they believe public child welfare is a punitive system, it is ineffective, with ineffective policies, and that the system lacks prepared workers while being hectic. Participant one shared the following quote:

> It's like a piece of Swiss cheese, that's just like gaping holes where there needs to be professionals that get paid well, have the experience to, and are from the communities they're working in to actually see like an overhaul of positive change.

Public Child Welfare Workers. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates perceived public child welfare workers to be people that care deeply about children. They believe there are amazing caseworkers that have gone above and beyond to safeguard children and their well-being. They believe workers experience difficulties in balancing caseloads, interventions, and their environment. One shared, "I think it's hard to find the right focus and the right balance of like caseload and interventions and their specific role with the environment that they have to deal with like it's tough."

Positive Perception. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduate shared that their perception has been changed positively by other agencies that have been doing amazing work. Another MSW graduate believes there is "value" in the system, and it is necessary.

Responsibilities. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate described their perception of public child welfare as having myriad responsibilities and the need for workers to have in-depth knowledge in this field. For example:

> Compounded issues of like poverty, homelessness, like lack of employment, mental health of the parent, substance, like all of these things, and then we kind of expect *(public child welfare)* to just like fix that. And I think that's like a really unfair kind of burden for one system to figure out.

Varied Perception. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates shared that their perception of public child welfare varied. One participant shared that they believe it can be a beneficial system if all the parts are moving well. Another MSW graduate shared that, as public child welfare varies to a great extent based on the state and county, their perception changes based on each agency. One shared, "people are trying to do the best that they can, and sometimes the among of people on a on someone's caseload is not sustainable to provide everything that they, that people need."

Survey and Interview Perceptions

Largely, perceptions from the survey and interview are similar, thereby suggesting the result would be the same regardless of data collection method as shown in Table 11. However, the interview participants did share positive perceptions. This suggests that different experiences may be recorded when talking with someone instead of typing in an answer.

Community Perceptions

MSW graduates (n = 13) were asked what they believe is the public perception of public child welfare. The results of this question were overwhelmingly negative, as shown in Table 11.

Thirteen (100 percent) MSW graduates shared that they believe the public has a negative

perception of public child welfare. Some believed that the public's perception was worse than

their perceptions.

Table 11

MSW Graduate Perceptions of Public Child Welfare

| Participant	Influencers Interview	Messages Interview	MSW Perceptions Survey	MSW Perceptions Interview	MSW Perceptions Survey and Interview	Community Perceptions Interview and Survey
1	Public Child Welfare Workers, Peers	Negative Messages	Negative Perception	Negative Perception	Negative Perception	Negative
2	Individual Experiences	Individual Experiences	Negative Perception	Positive Perception, Negative Perception	Negative Perception, Positive Perception	Negative
3	NA	NA	Negative Perception	NA	Negative Perception	Negative
4	NA	NA	Negative Perception	NA	Negative Perception	Negative
5	NA	NA	Negative Perception	NA	Negative Perception	Negative
6	Individual Experiences	Little Messages	Public Child Welfare Workers, Negative Perception	Public Child Welfare Workers, Positive Perception, Negative Perception	Public Child Welfare Workers, Negative Perception, Positive Perception	Negative

7	Media, Peers, Service Providers	Negative Messages	Public Child Welfare Workers, Negative Perception	Negative Perception	Negative Perception, Public Child Welfare Workers	Negative
8	NA	NA	Negative Perception	NA	Negative Perception	Negative
9	Individual Experiences, Media	Media, Negative Messages	Negative Perception	Varied Perception, Negative Perception	Negative Perception, Varied Perception	Negative
10	Peers	NA	Negative Perception	Varied Perception	Negative Perception, Varied Perception	Negative
11	NA	NA	Varied Perception	NA	Varied Perception, Negative Perception	Negative
12	NA	NA	Negative Perception	NA	Negative Perception	Negative
13	Individual Experiences, Public Child Welfare Workers	Media, Negative Messages, Risks of Work	Negative Perception, Public Child Welfare Workers, Responsibilities	Public Child Welfare Workers, Responsibilities, Varied Perception, Negative Perception	Public Child Welfare Workers, Negative Perception, Responsibilities, Varied Perception	Negative

Career in Public Child Welfare

In this section, MSW graduates were asked to describe and weigh the benefits and risks of a career in public child welfare. They were also asked to describe how they believe public child welfare would help or hurt their career. Figure 7 adds data-based specificity to the decision-making tree, including factors related to a career in public child welfare. This section takes a closer look at research questions one and two. Research questions one and two relate to both factors and perceptions related to the decision-making process. Interview participants identified skills and rewarding work as perceived benefits of working in public child welfare. Participants identified the risk to professional quality of life in public child welfare. Participants also identified that public child welfare would help their career by providing the ability to influence and by helping them gain historical context and skill development opportunities. Participants mainly identified that public child welfare would not hurt their career or would lead to a lack of growth. Participants identified that their perceptions of public child welfare have influenced their career decisions.

Figure 7

MSW Graduate Perceptions of Career in Public Child Welfare
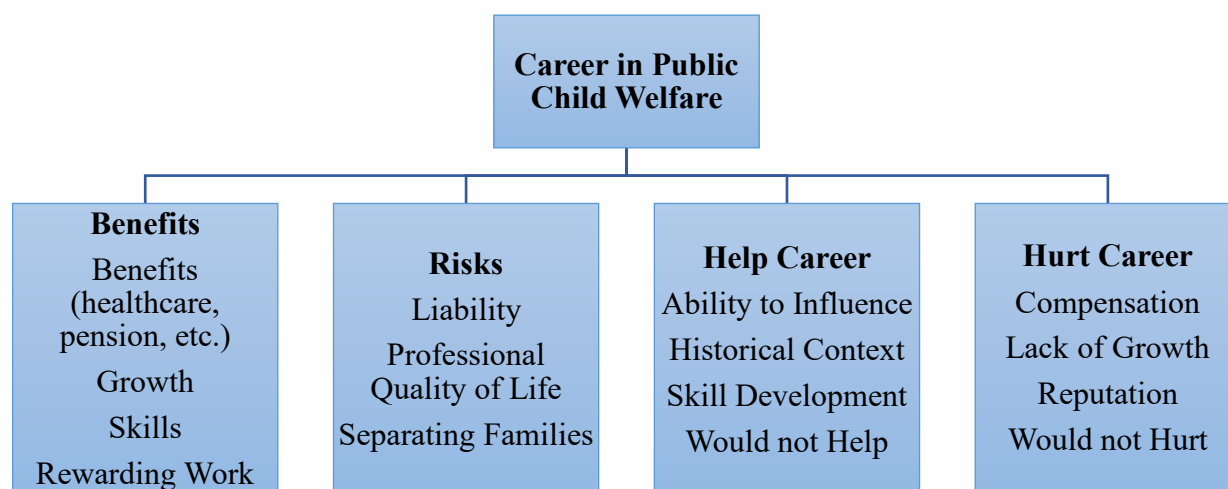
Career in Public Child Welfare Benefits

Interview participants (n = 7) identified how working in public child welfare would benefit their career. Identified benefits included benefits, growth, skills, and rewarding work, as shown in Table 12.

Benefits. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates identified that the actual benefits, such as "healthcare and pension," would be beneficial.

Growth. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates identified "growth," opportunities, access to resources, and further learning about the system as benefits.

Skills. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates shared that increasing their skillset would be a benefit. This includes building relationships, working with clients, educating others, and having the skills to help children. For example, "you have the ability to make change in a very unique way and give a voice to and help kind of help children who might not be able to articulate what's going on in their lives."

Rewarding Work. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates identified the nature of the work as beneficial. The ability to have an impact in the lives of others and doing rewarding work was perceived as rewarding. One participant shared that reuniting families would be a benefit of the work. A participant stated, "it's wonderful to see them just get the resources that they didn't that they weren't able to get before or to learn how to do whatever it is, they need to do to be better parents to their children."

Career in Public Child Welfare Risks

Interview participants (n = 7) identified what they believed were risks of working in public child welfare. The risks identified included liability, professional quality of life, and separating families, as shown in Table 12.

Liability. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate shared that they believe there is always someone watching over you in public child welfare and that there is a "haunting" feeling that there is a great amount of liability risk in that practice. This participant cited a case where a child died under the watch of public child welfare and the public child welfare workers were prosecuted for the outcome of the case. A participant shared, "I vividly remember working in child welfare and feeling like I always had an eye over me and like something always watching and ensuring that your notes are accurate and they're up to date."

Professional Quality of Life. Six (85.71 percent) MSW graduates believe that their well-being and quality of life is at risk if they work in public child welfare. Participants specified secondary trauma, burnout, challenging caseloads, dual role, chronic stress, and well-being in this context. A participant shared, "professional quality of life, I don't know if that always the highest and I think like you know secondary trauma."

Separating Families. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate shared that there is an inherent risk in the job of removing children from a home. There are stories of workers getting hurt or threatened because of their role in a child's removal from their home. For example, "I have heard some really like terrible and horrific stories about um CPS workers who have been injured or hurt because of their role in a child's removal."

Public Child Welfare Help Career

Interview participants (n = 7) identified how they believed working in public child welfare would help their career. Participants identified ability to influence, historical context, skill development, and they also highlighted how it would not help their career, as shown in Table 12.

Ability to Influence. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates identified that working in public child welfare would help their career with the ability to "educate people" and create change in the agency. They, in turn, would be able to help the lives of very vulnerable populations.

Historical Context. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates thought it would be helpful for their career to work in public child welfare to understand the historical context as well as "understand" what is happening firsthand in the agencies now.

Skill Development. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates believed that the multidisciplinary nature of the field would help their career and enable them to deal with different aspects of the field. They also thought it would be helpful in developing their clinical skills and making them a "well-rounded social worker."

Would Not Help. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates did not feel that working in public child welfare would help their careers.

Public Child Welfare Hurt Career

Interview participants (n = 7) identified how they believed working in public child welfare would hurt their career. Participants identified compensation, lack of growth, reputation, and would not hurt, as shown in Table 12.

Compensation. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate thought that public child welfare would hurt their career, as they would "probably be taking a pay cut."

Lack of Growth. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates perceived working in public child welfare as a "step back" in their career. They did not think that there would be opportunities for growth.

Reputation. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate felt that working in public child welfare would hurt their reputation. They shared that, "people would have like a negative perception of me."

Would not Hurt. Four (57.14 percent) MSW graduates shared that they did not believe that working in public child welfare would hurt their career. One shared, "I don't think it would hurt my career, I just don't see the overall benefit."

Perceptions Influence Career Decisions

MSW graduates that participated in the interview (n = 7) were asked if they believed that their perceptions shaped their career decisions. Participants identified no influence, yes influence, and not aligned, as shown in Table 12.

No Influence. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate did not believe that their perception of public child welfare shaped their career decisions. They shared the following statement:

> I don't think the perception of what child welfare does to families or thinks like that has, has shaped my career decisions, I think some of my experiences navigating certain systems and just being sustainable um were, have definitely impacted my career decisions.

Not Aligned. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate felt that other jobs outside of the public

child welfare sector were better aligned with their interests. They shared, "I think I just feel like I

have other interests clinically and, like in the field that are more aligned to like get like education

and like advocacy."

Yes Influenced. Five (71.43 percent) MSW graduates that participated in the interview

felt that their perceptions of public child welfare shaped their career decisions. A participant

shared the following quote:

> I've never thought about it that way, but I left working, I guess I left the direct practice of
>
> working with children and youth, and *(public child welfare)* and peripherally I still work
>
> with them, but not in the foster care system.

Table 12

MSW Graduate Perception of Career in Public Child Welfare

Participant	Career in Public Child Welfare Benefits	Career in Public Child Welfare Risks	Public Child Welfare Help Career	Public Child Welfare Hurt Career	Perceptions Influence Career Decisions
1	Rewarding Work	Professional Quality of Life	Would not Help	Compensation, Lack of Growth	Yes Influenced
2	Benefits	Liability	Skill Development	Lack of Growth	Yes Influenced
6	Growth	Professional Quality of Life	Historical Context	Would not Hurt	Yes Influenced
7	Benefits	Professional Quality of Life,	Would not Help	Would not Hurt	Yes Influenced

9	Growth, Skills	Separating Families Professional Quality of Life	Ability to Influence, Historical Context	Lack of Growth, Reputation	Yes Influenced
10	Rewarding Work, Skills	Professional Quality of Life	Ability to Influence	Would not Hurt	No Influence
13	Rewarding Work, Skills	Professional Quality of Life, Separating Families	Skill Development	Would not Hurt	Not Aligned

Social Justice

Social justice is a pillar of social work values and plays an important role in child welfare. The NASW Code of Ethics states, "Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients" (NASW, 2017). Social injustices can include issues related to poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and others (NASW, 2017). The principal investigator included questions to better understand MSW graduates' understanding of social justice and how MSW graduates perceive the connection between public child welfare and social work, as it relates to research question three. Understanding the connection to social justice is important, as it directly relates to the job search. As identified above, social work values are important to many participants. If the connection is largely negative, then it could be a factor in understanding why social workers are not choosing public child welfare. Figure 8 depicts a word cloud of the most spoken words related to social justice. This section helps to understand research question two. Interview participants defined social justice as action and equity. Participants indicated that social justice and public child welfare have a connection that is negative and perpetuates biases.

Figure 8

Social Justice Word Cloud

Definitions of Social Justice

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to define social justice. Key identified terms included action, equality, equity, and opportunity, as shown in Table 13.

Action. Six (85.71 percent) MSW graduates defined social justice as the ability to translate our skills to make the world and conditions of life right. Social justice was defined as advocacy for our clients. This includes grassroots activism to create social justice movements. This advocacy includes the idea of lifting each other up to break through those barriers. One shared, "I feel that social justice is much more of a community activism grassroots collaboration, and I admire the social justice movements even coming out of you know, small communities."

Equality. One (14.28%) MSW graduate defined social justice as promoting equality within all systems with the aim of people and acknowledge racism. They shared the following quote:

I would define it as an equitable provision of resources. I would define it as like yeah like an equitable access to opportunity. I think, specifically within the field of child welfare, I think, social justice, looks like I want to say, like an elimination of racism right.

Equity. Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates defined social justice as equitable access to resources and opportunities and the ability to address the root of the issue with a social work lens. Participant two defined social justice as follows:

In a single word, equity, and in a greater definition off the top of my head, being able to address the root of the issue specifically with a lens on social work, instead of going into a family or into a home or into a school and saying oh here's what you're doing wrong, let's fix that for you.

Opportunity. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates defined social justice as having opportunities. This includes the ability to move out of cycles of trauma and feel hope. One participant stated the following:

I would define it just as you know having opportunities, having access and um being able to break some of the cycles of trauma and a lot of community's trauma and families being able to um you know, feel hope and to move forward and to that end to have that across the board.

Public Child Welfare and Social Justice

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked if they believe that public child welfare has a connection to social justice. Participants identified bias, connection, equity, and punishment in association to public child welfare and social justice, as shown in Table 13.

Bias. Five (71.43 percent) MSW graduates identified that there is bias, including marginalization and racism, in public child welfare. For example, "a lot of children and families within the child welfare system has been marginalized."

Connection. Six (85.71 percent) MSW graduates believed there was a connection between public child welfare and social justice, but there was no consensus on whether this was a positive or negative connection. Majority of interview participants shared a negative connection. It was clear that MSW graduates believed that there is ample opportunity for public child welfare representatives to be leaders of social justice.

Equity. One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate believed that public child welfare should be creating equity for families, but this is not always the case. For example, "the child welfare system, I think, historically has not always engaged with clients in an equitable, equitable way and that it hinders social justice."

Punishment. Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates thought that those encountering public child welfare may experience punishment instead of help. For example, "it's very what you've done instead of what's happened to you, and that these are all earned."

Table 13

MSW Graduate Public Child Welfare and Social Justice

Participant	Definitions of Social Justice	Public Child Welfare and Social Justice
1	Equity, Action	Connection, Punishment, Bias
2	Action	Connection, Bias
6	Opportunity	Connection, Bias

7	Action	Connection
9	Equality, Action	Connection, Bias
10	Equity, Action	Connection, Bias, Punishment
13	Equity, Opportunity	Connection, Equity, Bias

Unique Findings

The following findings were not addressed in research questions, however, unexpected themes emerged that are relevant to perceptions and factors related to the decision-making process.

Public Child Welfare Effect on Social Work

A few participants reported that the community perception that public child welfare hurts is detrimental to the social work *profession*. In their view, the community generalizes its negative perception of child welfare to all of social work practice. One participant identified that once their clients got to know them, they compared them to public child welfare workers. The client would share that this person was "not bad like them."

Guilt

Interview participants reported that they felt guilty when seeking fair compensation for their skills and services. Participants also shared that they felt guilty when they shared their negative perceptions of the public child welfare system. For example, one participant shared the following:

I know I'm saying a lot of negative things and I know that it's incredibly important work, and I know that people do the best that they can, and you know that the structure itself does, for the most part the best that it can, but there are a lot of structural issues overall.

Importance of Public Child Welfare

Interview participants highlighted the need for the public child welfare system, believing that it is still crucial regardless of perception to keep children safe.

Punitive Nature of Public Child Welfare

A few participants viewed the public child welfare system as punitive in nature. In their view, the parents or caregivers do something "bad", and they are punished. Participants noted the irony or punitive labeling in the context of social work values. Social work has held social justice as a value and work that is punitive in nature is not what social workers want to do. Not only is against social work values but it is also not trauma informed. In this case, participants shared that this was against the nature of social work. Participants wanted to "lift them up" instead of breaking them down.

Perception Change

A few interview participants identified that their perception of public child welfare changed over time. One attributed this change to experiences and professors who were creating positive change. Others also attributed this change to the university they attended for their MSW. This result could lead to qualitative work in the future in terms of understanding changes in perceptions.

Public Child Welfare Suggested Changes

Interview participants (n = 7) were asked to share changes that would attract professionals to public child welfare. Participants suggested changes to organizational culture, family focus, hiring practices, work tasks, compensation, pride, support for workers, and continuing education, as shown in Table 14. Suggested changes relate to research questions one, two, and three. Suggested changes identified by participants include compensation, support for workers, continuing education, and work tasks.

Organizational Culture

One (14.28 percent) MSW graduate identified the need to change the overall culture in the public child welfare system. They stated, "I just think that is really beneficial and change the overall culture of like the public child welfare system in general."

Family Focus

Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates suggested that advocates working with families should be given more autonomy and agency. Other MSW graduates felt that there is a need to provide more support and voice to parents and caregivers. For example, "we're all talking about what the family needs but it's like because we're the experts, but it's like, it's their lives, like like what do they want?"

Hiring Practices

Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates felt that staff that are hired should have a social work degree or a similar degree. For example, "I really think that it should be that you that you need to have an MSW and even like an LMSW or and LCSW."

Work Tasks

Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates shared work tasks, which made the job difficult and needed solutions, including mountains of paperwork, unmanageable caseloads, and better explanation of services to families. Participants recommended reduction in caseloads for workers.

Compensation

Five (71.43 percent) MSW graduates felt that the compensation is too little for the job of working in public child welfare. They want to be paid "fairly."

Pride

Two (28.57 percent) MSW graduates want to "feel good" about their work and be "effective" while performing their work.

Support for Workers

Five (71.43 percent) MSW graduates suggested facilitating more support for workers, in general, as well as providing aid and support to workers dealing with stress, burnout, and excess workload. They also felt that there needs to be more open communication amongst service providers and systems (child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health).

Continuing Education

Three (42.86 percent) MSW graduates identified the need for more training and educational opportunities. One stated, "for me personally, it was training opportunities or if it was the ability to, to learn and be supported in a way, even if financially it was not there."

Table 14

MSW Graduate Suggested Changes to Public Child Welfare

Participant	Suggested Changes
1	Compensation, Continuing Education, Family Focus, Support for Workers
2	Compensation, Hiring Practices
6	Pride, Support for Workers, Work Tasks
7	Compensation, Family Focus, Support for Workers, Work Tasks
9	Organizational Culture, Hiring Practices
10	Compensation, Continuing Education, Support for Workers, Work Tasks
13	Compensation, Continuing Education, Pride, Support for Workers

CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Data from this research confirm themes from relevant literature *and* respond to significant gaps in the contemporary knowledge base. This final chapter summarizes and expands upon major findings, including negative perceptions of public child welfare and how they may shape MU graduates' decision-making processes. The broader implications of these findings also are considered. Finally, this chapter identifies remaining questions and directions for further research.

Summary

Participant Profile

According to Data USA (2017), the average age of social workers in the United States is about 42 years, with an average salary of $46,285. About 81 percent of social workers in the United States are female and approximately 19 percent are male (Data USA, 2017). About 58 percent of social workers in the United States are white (non-Hispanic) and 20 percent are black (non-Hispanic) (Data USA, 2017). The participants in the study have a lower average age at about 30 years than the average of all social workers in the United States. The average salary of participants that are working full time is above the United States average at $62,029. Similarly, in this study, 85 percent of participants identified as female, and 15 percent identified as male. Given the opportunity to identify gender, participants wrote in male and female. Dissimilarly, 85 percent of participants identified as white, and 15 percent identified as black.

Survey versus Interview

Sample considerations include comparisons of the study's two groups: participants who responded via survey versus those who completed the survey *and* participated in individual interviews. All participants had a negative perception of public child welfare and felt that the community also had a negative perception of the system. Understanding that this study was related to perceptions of public child welfare may have made them more likely to respond to the online survey. Interview participants shared that there was some name recognition (i.e., they recognized this researcher's name), which made them want to complete both the online survey and individual interview. Participants across the board showed commitment to the field of social work as well as discontent with public child welfare.

Both groups of participants reported that the negative community perception of public child welfare is detrimental to the profession of social work. In their view, the community generalizes its negative perception of child welfare to all disciplines within social work practice. Participants discussed the need for improved "culture." Some specified "organizational culture," but participants did not elaborate on their understanding of culture, nor were they able to provide details with specificity regarding this construct. Given the centrality of organizational culture to research and practice at the macro level, this gap may be attributable to the micro-macro disconnect described below (Discussion, The Great Divide).

Discussion

Misalignment and Mending the Great Divide

As noted in Chapter 1, rational choice theory provides a framework for understanding which factors are considered by MSW graduates as they make career choices, and how these factors affect them in the jobs that comprise their professional lives. Participants reported that

they wanted jobs in which they are paid well and can grow their skills in a team with similar values, expectations, and practices. The absence of these very factors is documented in the literature (Marsh, 2020) and underscored by this study's findings. The result is an interesting misalignment between preferences and the experiences they have in public child welfare. This alignment could be useful in efforts to understand rapid turnover and burnout. Given what we know about the negative conditions in public child welfare, it may be that social workers who want to help children decide to do so in what they anticipate will be healthier work environments.

The realignment of preferences and actual work conditions would seem to require higher-level change, involving strong leadership and knowledge of macro practice. In their current jobs, MSW graduates report that they find system challenges and work tasks as organized by the current structures to be quite difficult. Next steps in research could include a more comprehensive exploration of change sought by current child welfare workers and the extent to which they feel prepared to initiate that change.

Evidence from this study seems to confirm that participants are aware of the need for higher-level change. As summarized in Table 14, their views of *what* should be changed emanate from the negative messages they have received. For example, some have heard that public child welfare does not pay well, so the answer is to pay better. They have heard the organizational culture is bad, so they suggest systemic overhaul or changes. Suggested changes included organizational culture, family focus, hiring practices, work tasks compensation, pride, support for workers, and continuing education.

The familiar concern regarding the divide between micro and macro social work practice seems relevant, here. Most of the responding participants are micro (clinical in focus), but report

being met with and frustrated by macro-level (system, policy, research) challenges. In weighing jobs and career paths, respondents articulated their plan to avoid jobs with systemic challenges, including public child welfare. None of the respondents expressed an interest in or willingness to *address* higher-level dysfunction that would involve macro-level social work. One possibility is that the enduring "split" between micro and macro practice, in both education and career path, renders MSW applicants unaware, unprepared, or overwhelmed by higher-level change strategies.

Social work roots are tied to macro practice (i.e., community development, advocacy, social policy), and yet macro practice is undervalued in the field, and schools of social work devote comparatively less time to educating students for macro-level work (Teixeira et al., 2021). The devaluation of macro work has been amplified by the drive to professionalize social work and align it with the more respected medical models of practice and licensure (Teixeira et.al., 2021). Effective social workers will be trained in creating change at all levels of intervention, with equal emphasis on micro and macro practice. The divide has proven to be detrimental to social workers as they are unable to move forward as social change agents. As noted in the Implications section below, methods to address the divide between micro and macro practice can be spearheaded by schools of social work.

The strengths-based orientation of social work practice may lead to another misalignment. In true social work fashion, participants were able to identify strengths of working in public child welfare, though those strengths were not important to them when looking for jobs; that is, they appeared not to enter the cost-benefit considerations. Interview participants agreed that working in public child welfare posed a risk to professional quality of life. It seems that MSW graduates could identify strengths of the field, but those strengths may obscure their

honest assessment of the challenges of public child welfare practice. Answers from MSW graduates were not clear as to whether they felt public child welfare would help or hurt their career. Again, this could be that social workers can always find value and strength in everything. Next steps in research could encompass a more in depth look at what MSW graduates see as factors that would help or hurt their career as it was not clearly defined in this study.

Bending the Linear Model

As described by contemporary models and literature, the post-graduate career trajectory is typically linear: a decision is made based on information gathered and the career begins and then ends. Data from MSW graduates suggests that a curved heuristic might be more appropriate, as it allows for feedback and myriad points of information gathering and perception shift. Results from this study serve as a reminder that perceptions are malleable, and that graduates will have more than one job during the span of their careers. Given the longevity and unpredictability of the career-building process, it seems likely that there will be multiple opportunities to shape perceptions of public child welfare and respond to the negative reputation of the child welfare system.

Figure 9 illustrates this more circular decision-making process. Throughout their careers, social workers receive and process information that is integrated into career re-evaluation and decision-making. In this study, eleven of thirteen of the participants indicated they are undecided as to whether they would work in the public child welfare system in the future but did go on to indicate position preferences. Indecision could indicate that respondents are still considering the possibility of working in public child welfare. The positions they selected are revealing; most indicated that they would consider jobs that were *not direct* service, including supervisor,

manager, administrator, and state level positions. Given that much of the negativity that surrounds public child welfare stems from direct service, it may be that respondents were influenced by this messaging and moving toward more administrative positions as a result. Future research could explore this possibility.

Figure 9

Conceptualization of Cycle of MSW Graduate Career
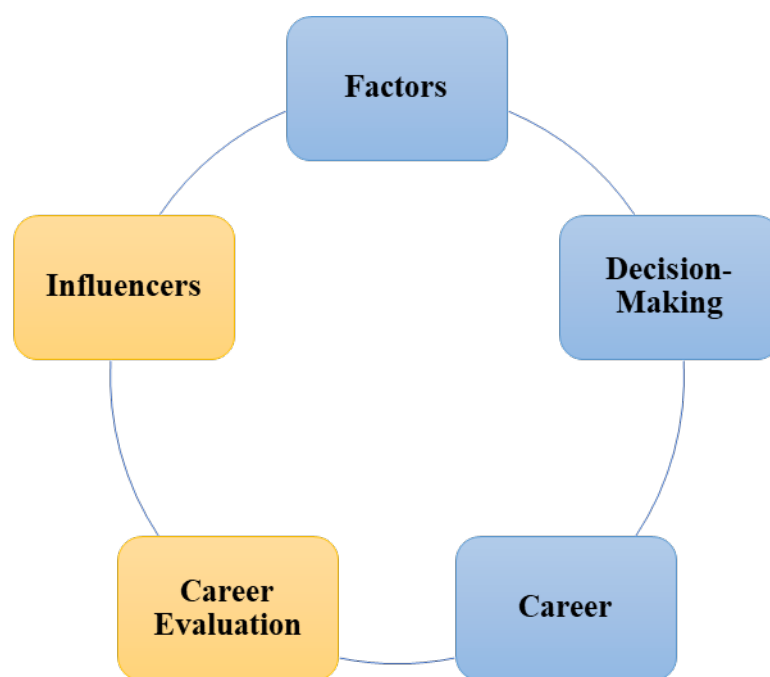
Respondents did indicate that specializing in child welfare was helpful and beneficial to their future and current goals. Future research could specifically identify those factors that were most helpful and how they shaped later career decisions. Given the apparent circularity of decision-making related to careers, it may be that there is much more to understand about post-graduation experiences and their connection to work in public child welfare. The majority of MSW graduates are staying in children's services. This indicates a dedication to the population; however, it seems that *public child welfare* is a low-preference job for these MSW graduates.

Results suggest that if there are major fundamental changes to public child welfare including compensation and support for workers, MSW graduates would remain interested in this work. The necessity in the system was clear to respondents. Social workers have specific ethics and values that in their view were compromised by the current public child welfare conditions.

Symbolism in Action

Neutralizing the Negative

Findings provide valuable insight into MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare. Participants identified that their own experiences had the most influence on these perceptions. For participants who have *not* worked in public child welfare, there are other sources of strong influence. They hear stories directly from families they work with or have negative experiences with public child welfare in other ways. The findings of this study confirm that MSW graduates hear negative stories from peers, PCW workers, professors, families, and children themselves. Reunification and adoption stories are just as, if not more prevalent as negative experiences, but MSW graduates did not share those in the course of this research. This gap in information could indicate a point of entry for messaging that creates more positive expectations among graduate students. It suggests that professors and coworkers can intervene with the positive stories that could change the perception of public child welfare. Interview participants discussed in other questions how professors made a difference in their perceptions, and even changed negative perceptions to positive perceptions. More research could explore the role of faculty in the creation and dissemination of images and information that shape MSW graduates' perceptions.

Overwhelmingly, the perceptions of public child welfare from MSW graduates were negative. MSW graduates also felt the community views public child welfare in a negative light. They often excluded public child welfare workers from this assessment of negative perception, noting that they are doing the best they can. This suggests that MSW graduates believe the challenges in public child welfare are systemic and hinder workers. Participants understood caseworkers must operate in bad working conditions, and often take the blame themselves for errors. The micro/macro divide appears to shape participants' perceptions at every level, and the lens of symbolic interactionism brings this dynamic into sharper focus. Here, respondents separate the worker from the system, though the interaction between the two is what creates the challenges that become the "meaning" of public child welfare. This view again confirms that changing perceptions and improving systems will undoubtedly include mending the disconnect between micro and macro social work practice. Symbolic interactionism requires interaction, and if micro and macro are separated it creates an "us versus them" mentality. It allows case workers to blame the system of public child welfare for their problems, and in turn, the system can blame the case workers for their problems.

Symbolic interactionism allows for a deeper understanding of "negativity," as well. Participants across the board felt that the community views public child welfare negatively, and they resisted being associated professionally with the public child welfare practice. It may be that public child welfare symbolized "negative" or "bad" practice and therefore, participants resisted the association in fear that it would be applied directly to them. It is interesting to note that while participants thus avoided public child welfare, they felt guilty about doing so. Though speculative, this finding could suggest that service to children symbolizes "goodness" that makes respondents feel uncomfortable about eschewing public child welfare, which is populated by the

most vulnerable children. Respondents' emotional connection to career choices is ripe for additional research. Participants typically expressed themes of wanting to do good work and wanting to feel valued, but it appears public child welfare could not, in their view, meet these aspirations.

Determining Value

There are common misconceptions about what MSW graduates should accept in a job. Social workers interviewed reported that they "know" they will not be paid as well in public child welfare as a social worker in other fields. In interviews, there were themes of guilt for participants when talking specifically about pay. Societal and personal ambivalence about the value of public child welfare (and what it symbolizes) seems pervasive. Does the heartfelt desire to "do good" undercut the value of public child welfare workers' professional skills, thereby justifying lower pay? As stated in the literature review, public child welfare workers are paid below the poverty level (Marsh, 2020). While this may not be true for every public child welfare position, the low-pay narrative is part of the messaging received by MSW graduates. Complicating things further is the fact that this message may be untrue or anachronistic. MSW graduates in this study report their salaries that are well-above the reported average for caseworkers in public child welfare starting with a starting salary of $30,018 in Pennsylvania (DePasquale, 2017). This also demonstrates the healthy number of jobs provided by other agencies and organizations that are willing and able to pay well above what public child welfare offers.

Social Justice

The ambivalence that is evident regarding motivation, public child welfare work, and its value could be related to larger issues of social justice. Respondents in this study may have been drawn to public child welfare because it offers an opportunity to "do good," but they are clearly not blind to systemic flaws, some of which are noted above. Taken together, it seems that MSW graduates see the public child welfare system as a subversion of social justice or, at least, an obstruction. As a key value in social work, social justice was connected by participants to public child welfare in a negative way.

In this study, respondents alluded to the current climate of social change and the existence of social movements, while suggesting that public child welfare *could* be involved in these initiatives but was not. Participants identified instances of social injustice carried out by the public child welfare system. Participants expressed anger and sadness for the way they have seen, firsthand, underserved populations and their treatment by public child welfare. For example, Participant 13 became emotional in their interview when describing a memory of working with a family that had a negative experience with the public child welfare system. In this participant's view, the public child welfare system came to symbolize punishment. Their view is that families involved in public child welfare are labeled "bad" before they are given a fair chance. This illustrates the power of firsthand experiences in shaping symbols and meanings.

When asked to describe social justice, participants struggled to provide a clear definition. One participant pointed out that there are entire books dedicated to defining social justice. Though lacking specificity, participants' responses did identify two themes that resonate with the profession's Code of Ethics: equity and action. According to the Code, social workers must "promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW, 2022). This requirement invokes a sense of action that is made explicit: "...social

workers challenge social injustice" (NASW, 2022). MSW graduates acknowledge that there are social injustices that occur in public child welfare, but again echoing the person-system, micro-macro split, they are clear that social justice is *not* pursued "above" them and, further, they suggest that the flawed public child welfare system makes it impossible to adhere to social work values in their direct practice. Participants identified that the opportunity for self-determination is taken from parents, caregivers, and children, furthering social injustice. Clearly, additional research is needed to explore how public child welfare workers envision social justice, as well as how they envision their participation in the pursuit of this social work value.

Strengths and Limitations

Several methodological strengths support the findings of this study and meet gaps in current knowledge. Data were collected through both an online survey and individual interview, which illustrated reliability through similarities in answers regardless of the way data were collected. The sample was relatively homogeneous in nature because the participants were from the same program and had the same certification and degree. In this case, the sample size reached saturation with 13 participants in the online survey and 7 individual interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Guest et al., 2020). Choice of theoretical framework allowed for a greater understanding of the perceptions of MSW graduates of public child welfare in both meaning-making and decision-making processes.

Participants understood that the investigator was looking at perceptions of public child welfare, which poses a limitation in this study. Understanding the purpose of the interview and survey could have influenced participants' responses. For example, perhaps they wanted to be "helpful" or "defend" their decisions regarding career choices. The timing of this study may be

important, as well. Data were gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced answers of participants. For example, clinical workers may consider the job factor of mileage reimbursement for traveling to homes, schools, etc. However, the pandemic has changed the setting of work to more at home and virtual work. Many social work jobs have stayed virtual, so a few participants expressed having looked for virtual or flexible work. Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the sample with most of the participants being white in race. Having a more diverse sample could potentially have implications for the findings of this study.

Implications

This study of recent MSW graduates has implications at various levels of social work education and practice, offering insights that may shape pedagogy, training, and issues related to retention and recruitment.

Social Work Education and Training

The reconceptualization of decision making presented in this research suggests that educators could do far more to prepare public child welfare workers for the challenges they will face. The study's identification of factors that shape graduates' career choices points to targets for balanced information and enhanced skill development. Most participants concentrated in micro (clinical) work but are looking for more skills in leadership, organizational change, and social justice regardless of concentration. For students focusing on clinical skills, more training can be provided in these areas so that they can serve their clients effectively. For example, findings indicate a need for further education around not only identifying social injustice but challenging and intervening when social injustices occur. Courses that focus on child welfare

should be staffed with knowledgeable, dedicated faculty from the field of child welfare that can share positive stories from the field.

Social work education prepares students interested in child welfare for the work, but may have gaps when it comes to perceptions, risk, and ethics. It is also valuable for schools of social work to understand the social work students' willingness, or lack thereof, to work in public child welfare. Many schools of social work participate in Title IV-E programming and funding and seem to assume that increased training and increased involvement in this state program will eventually solve public child welfare problems. However, information from study participants suggests that this approach may be the equivalent of tilting at windmills. "Increased training" and/or intensified training recruitment efforts do not seem to respond to factors identified by participants in this study. None of the participants in this study participated in programs like CWEL during their master's degree. CWEL requires that students work in public child welfare after graduation for a certain number of years. If there is no interest in working in public child welfare, then potential students will not participate in that program and funding. Positive stories and views of the public child welfare system may help to recruit students for programs such as CWEL; addressing systemic challenges to make public child welfare jobs more appealing and fulfilling seems imperative.

Systemic Change and Leadership

Previous research suggests that the conditions of public child welfare, as well as media coverage of its missteps, may create a shared understanding that public child welfare organizations are a very difficult place to work. This study confirms that MSW graduates share and consider these perceptions in their career decision-making process. While this study

involved one program in a northeastern university, it provides additional justification for changes in the state and local level child welfare practices. This study suggests that MSW graduates believe that current training and education can help prepare public child welfare workers for their work with families. However, it falls short in terms of preparing them to affect the organizational challenges they face such as burnout, negative culture, unfair compensation, and risks to their career. Not only do MSW graduates feel unprepared and suggest that people in leadership positions are not implementing meaningful changes.

In speaking with MSW graduates, many believe that the public child welfare system needs an overhaul from its currently punitive nature. These implications may sway Pennsylvania or other states to make changes in their child welfare planning practices. Anecdotal evidence suggests that planning for the Family First Prevention Services Act continues to emphasize traditional training and typical responses to crises in child welfare. It seems that recent MSW graduates' awareness of this trend would provide little incentive to enter public child welfare professionally. To recruit and retain qualified staff, public child welfare must change to fit the values of social work.

This study confirms that challenges exist in every dimension of child welfare practice, from education and preparation to job entry, training, and retention. Leaders who understand the full spectrum of child welfare are needed. In DePasquale's (2017) report, recommendation number 21 advised public child welfare agencies to partner with local schools of social work to provide experience to potential public child welfare caseworkers. Leaders in schools of social work can provide students with the information needed to combat the perceptions and challenges within public child welfare. Educational leadership is also required to adjust curricula and the content of child welfare specializations. There is ample evidence that organizational culture and

climate in public child welfare are notoriously challenging. This study helps leaders to understand the extent to which this notoriety affects the decision of MSWs who might enter the field. Leaders in social work can utilize this information to work with public child welfare leadership to advocate for changes in the system.

In Pennsylvania, new federal policies, included in the Family First Prevention Services Act, were implemented in October 2021. This implementation marks an opportunity to think critically about contemporary challenges and ways to improve child welfare. It is an ideal time for new leadership as well as social workers in the field to guide the implementation of these policies. Graduate social work programs can shape and support these leaders, who in turn can partner with child welfare and public child welfare agencies. Leaders who understand the value and findings of studies like this one will be better equipped to meet the challenges inherent to contemporary public child welfare. Informed systemic changes that improve the culture and climate of child welfare organizations will mitigate the impact of negative messaging in the media and, most importantly, improve services to vulnerable families.

Further Research

This exploratory study's findings establish a rich research agenda. A larger replication of this study, including diverse study sites, would add to the certainty of its findings. Initial research questions could be broadened to include different levels of education. Future studies could explore themes identified here with greater depth and refinement. It seems the micro-macro divide is more complex than sometimes presented, with implications for perceptions, learning, training, job experience, and developing a sense of self-efficacy. Future research could address these questions. Respondents' awareness of and interest in social justice seems promising, though

their inability to embrace social justice practices at all levels and envision system-level change raises serious concerns about training and education; more focused research exploring perceived barriers to social justice is warranted. Finally, though students comprise a captive audience for messaging and education, this research reveals that personal experiences happening outside of educational settings are weighed most heavily during decision making processes. Given this finding, a far greater understanding of how and why these experiences matter is needed.

Conclusions

Public child welfare continues to experience challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Evidence that systemic change is required is overwhelming. Stories of broken systems and burned-out social workers become the lore that is passed through generations of social workers who want to help children and families. Respondents in this study adhere to values that could lead to systemic changes, but they go stagnant in the war stories, micro-macro divide, and systemic conditions. Direct service social workers must wait for the policies or top-down systems to change, but that model has not worked. So, preparing those social workers to think and work macro, they themselves become the change agents. Meaningful efforts to change will involve bridging the micro-macro divide by teaching macro skills, making social workers themselves the change agents, and allowing for innovation and meaning making that moves against the status quo. Public child welfare has become a punitive and negative symbol for social workers as well as community members. This is not a linear process nor a matter of "what social workers hear." At multiple points in their careers social workers receive information, create meaning, and make calculated decisions regarding their careers. This complexity has been simplified in the literature and the cost is pervasive hopelessness. By targeting the myriad points

that are open for new stories, new ideas, new analyses, and new decisions, we can begin to create

change.

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Appendix A

Survey

You are being asked to complete this survey voluntarily. You will be asked to complete some demographic data questions followed by qualitative questions. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experience of MSW graduates searching for jobs and perceptions of public child welfare. Public child welfare can have many definitions depending on the person. For the purposes of this study, public child welfare is considered the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services at the state level and the Children and Youth Services Agency for each county. This includes the staff and workers of those systems. This does not include the private providers that contract with counties to provide services to children, youth, and families.

1. I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research study by Abigail Wilson, a Doctor of Social Work student at Millersville University. Please read the below information on the research study and your invitation to participate. Then please select the appropriate response to consent in this research project. The responses are located after the below informed consent information.

   Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

   You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age, graduated with MSW degree, and specialized in child welfare. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire question before noting your response at the bottom of this question.

   What is the study about and why are we doing it?

   The purpose of this study is to better understand MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare as well as factors important to MSW graduates in the job search.

   If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete some demographic data and qualitative questions.

   What risks might result from this study?

   There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

   How could you benefit from this study?

   Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others may benefit from our ability to improve education, training, and expectations of those interested in public child welfare.

How will your information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any report published with the results of this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. To protect your privacy information that could identify you will not be included. All data will be de-identified to ensure confidentiality. Only de-identified data will be saved and stored by the principal investigator on a password protected computer and through the Qualtrics program.

However, given that the survey can be completed from any computer (e.g., personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to enter your responses. As a participant in this study, you should be aware that certain "key logging" software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit.

It is possible that other people may need to see the information collected about you. These people work for Millersville University and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

There is no compensation available for participation.

Your participation in this study is voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind. You may contact Abigail Wilson at aawilso2@millersville.edu.

Contact Information for the Researcher and Questions about the research

The principal investigator conducting this study is Abigail Wilson (aawilso2@millersville.edu). The co-investigator supervising this study is Dr. Heather Girvin (heather.girvin@millersville.edu). You may ask any questions of any investigator at any time. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research you may contact these investigators at any time. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact Dr. Rene Munoz at the Millersville University office of Sponsored Programs and Research Administration at (717) 871-4457. You may also call this number with problems, complains, or concerns about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff. Or you wish to talk with someone who is an informed individual who is independent of the research team.

      a. Yes, I consent to participate in the research by Abigail Wilson, DSW Student

      b. No, I do not consent to participate in the research by Abigail Wilson, DSW Student

2. What is your age?

(Text)

3. How do you self-identify in terms of gender?
   (Text)
4. How do you self-identify in terms of race? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
   e. White
   f. Unknown
   g. Decline to answer
5. Are you of Hispanic, Latinx or Spanish origin?
   a. No, not of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin
   b. Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano
   c. Yes, Puerto Rican
   d. Yes, Cuban
   e. Yes, another Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin
   f. Unknown
   g. Decline to answer
6. What year did you graduate from the University with a specialization in child welfare?
   (Text)
7. How would you rate or describe your experience in the child welfare specialization?
   (Text)
8. Explain your motivations for completing the child welfare specialization at this university.
   (Text)
9. Did you participate in a program similar to Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL)?
   a. Yes
   b. No
10. What was your concentration?
    a. Micro
    b. Macro
    c. Other

10a. Is your current job in this concentration?

      d. Yes

    e. No

    f. Unsure

10b. Describe your current job.

   (Text)

11. What was your first job after graduation? (agency and job title)
   (Text)

11a. Is this the same as your current job?

    a. Yes

    b. No

11b. What was your starting salary at your first job after graduation?

   (Text)

11c. Is or was this first job in public child welfare?

    a. Yes

    b. No

12. What is your current job (agency and job title)?

   (Text)

12a. What is your current salary?

   (Text)

13. Please list your jobs in between if applicable. Please include social work and non-social work jobs.
   (Text)

14. What do you enjoy about your current job?
   (Text)

15. What are the hardest parts of your current job?
   (Text)

16. What factors do you look for in a job and place of employment?
   (Text)

17. Have you ever worked in public child welfare?

    a. Yes

    b. No

17a. If so, when?

   (Text)

17b. Are you still working in public child welfare?

    c. Yes

      d. No

18. Do you plan to work in public child welfare in the future?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Undecided
    d. If no, is there anything that public child welfare could change to attract your interest? (Text)

19. What, if any, position would you accept in public child welfare?
    a. Caseworker
    b. Supervisor
    c. Manager
    d. Administrator
    e. State-Level Position with the Office of Children, Youth and Families
    f. None

20. What is your perception of the public child welfare system?
    (Text)

21. What do you believe other people's perception is of public child welfare?
    (Text)

22. The next step in data collection includes individual interviews. Do you give the researcher, Abigail Wilson, permission to contact you to schedule an individual interview?
    a. Yes
    b. No

22a. What is your name?

(Text)

22b. What is your email?

(Text)

Appendix B

Individual Interview

Note that interview questions will be guided based on findings in the survey.

Perceptions of Public Child Welfare

Date: _____ *Time & Place:* _____

Interviewer: _____ *Interviewee:* _____

Other: _____

Pre-Interview Information & Procedures

Introduction: Thank you for your willingness to speak with me. My name is Abigail Wilson, and I am a Doctor of Social Work student at Millersville University. During this session I will as you a series of open-ended questions. This session will last no longer than an hour.

Study Purpose and Applications: Before we begin, I would like to share with you more about this study. The purpose of this study is to better understand MSW graduates' perceptions of public child welfare as well as factors important to MSW graduates in the job search. Public child welfare can have many definitions depending on the person. For the purposes of this study, public child welfare is considered the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services at the state level and the Children and Youth Services Agency for each county. This includes the staff and workers of those systems. This does not include the private providers that contract with counties to provide services to children, youth, and families.

The findings of this study will be utilized in my dissertation required for graduation from my program. The findings will be reported in this dissertation and other research papers. This information will be shared with my dissertation committee as well as through research papers and articles.

Consent Forms, Approvals: (Go over and fill out consent form if in person. If over Zoom, read consent form and obtain verbal consent. Also receive consent for recording the interview.)

Treatment of Data: *Researcher indicates how data will be managed, secured, and disposed of after a specific time period.*

Other Questions or Concerns: (Ask participant if they have any questions or concerns before starting the interview. Investigator will answer any questions or concerns they may have.)

Interview Section:

1. Tell me a bit about your experiences in the field of social work since graduation?
2. Tell me about the factors that are important for you to consider when looking for a job?
3. Tell me about your thoughts on a career in public child welfare?

4. Before you became a professional social worker, did you hear things about working in public child welfare? What were those messages?
5. What is your perception of public child welfare now?
6. Explain what you believe influences your perception of public child welfare?
7. Have your perceptions shaped your career decisions?
8. What do you consider as benefits of working in public child welfare?
9. How do you think working in public child welfare would help your career?
10. What do you consider as risks of working in public child welfare?
11. How do you think public child welfare would hurt your career?
12. Are there any changes that you believe should be made to the public child welfare system to attract potential employees?
13. To obtain your final thoughts, is there anything else you would like to tell me or share with me regarding today's topic?

Thank You: Thank you for your time and your insights on public child welfare. You have been provided with copies of the consent forms and my contact information. Please feel free to email me if you have any follow up or questions for me.

Appendix C

Consent Form

You are being asked to complete this survey voluntarily. You will be asked to complete some demographic data questions followed by qualitative questions. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the experience of MSW graduates searching for jobs and perceptions of public child welfare. Public child welfare can have many definitions depending on the person. For the purposes of this study, public child welfare is considered the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services at the state level and the Children and Youth Services Agency for each county. This includes the staff and workers of those systems. This does not include the private providers that contract with counties to provide services to children, youth, and families.

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How will your information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any report published with the results of this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. To protect your privacy information that could identify

you will not be included. All data will be de-identified to ensure confidentiality. Only de-identified data will be saved and stored by the principal investigator on a password protected computer and through the Qualtrics program.

However, given that the survey can be completed from any computer (e.g., personal, work, school), we are unable to guarantee the security of the computer on which you choose to enter your responses. As a participant in this study, you should be aware that certain "key logging" software programs exist that can be used to track or capture data that you enter and/or websites that you visit.

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