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# Professional Socialization of Macro Practice Social Workers

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# The professional socialization of macro practice social workers: A narrative inquiry

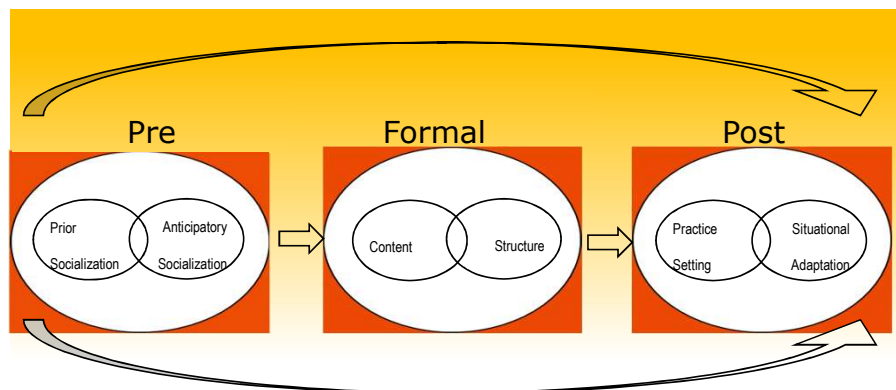
Mary Nienow, MSW, PhD

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Thank you NAME. My paper, the professional socialization of macro practice social workers, describes my doctoral dissertation in which I interviewed 14 macro practice social workers in the Midwest of the United States

## Framework for Professionalization of Social Workers

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Process of Ongoing Change and Outcomes

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The theoretical framework guiding this study was Sherri Miller's (2010) conceptual model for the professionalization of social workers. Professional socialization is defined as the process an individual undergoes as they move from an outside to an inside position within the profession. Miller's (2010) framework envisions this as a lifelong process, which identifies three stages: pre-socialization, formal socialization and post-socialization. Pre-socialization includes the early experiences of the individual, such as their family of origin and the environmental influences impacting them at a young age as well as the time when the individual chooses a particular profession to join and begins the process of taking on the attributes of their selected profession. In my study, the time individuals spent pursuing an undergraduate degree, in social work or another field, was considered a part of the pre-socialization experience. Formal socialization occurs within the educational context, specifically defined in my study as occurring when the individual was pursuing the graduate degree in social work. And post-socialization which occurs after formal socialization and within the professional realm as a new practitioner acculturates to their chosen work environment.

### Application of Model

While Miller's (2010) framework was not developed for macro practice social work specifically, it was broad enough to allow for application to this study.

## Methodology

- Qualitative
  - Narrative inquiry
- Purposive Sampling
  - MSW
  - Practicing as a macro practice social worker

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### **Methodology**

A narrative methodology was chosen because the primary goal of the research was to explore and how macro practice social workers experienced the process of professional socialization. The professional socialization research in social work has been primarily quantitative in nature (e.g., Boehm & Cohen, 2013; Bogo et al., 1995; Csikai & Rozensky, 1997; Han & Chow, 2010; Regehr et al., 2011; Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008) and not focused on how socialization into macro practice social work is occurring.

### **Recruitment and Sampling**

A purposive sample of social workers with an MSW from accredited schools of social work who are currently engaged in professional macro practice social work were recruited for this study.

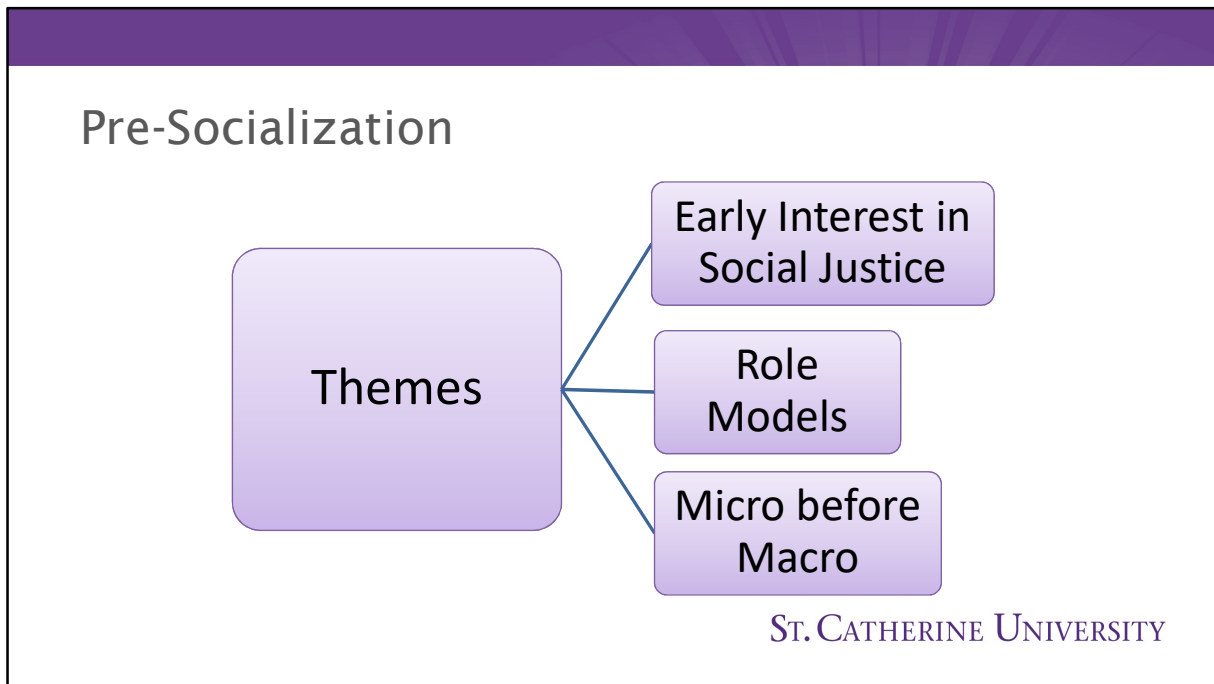
## Participants

- 14 MSW macro practice social workers
- White (12) Chinese-American (1) Native American (1)
- 12 women and 2 men
- Years in practice: 3-21
- Range in age: 26-49
- 7 had a BSW
- 7 were licensed

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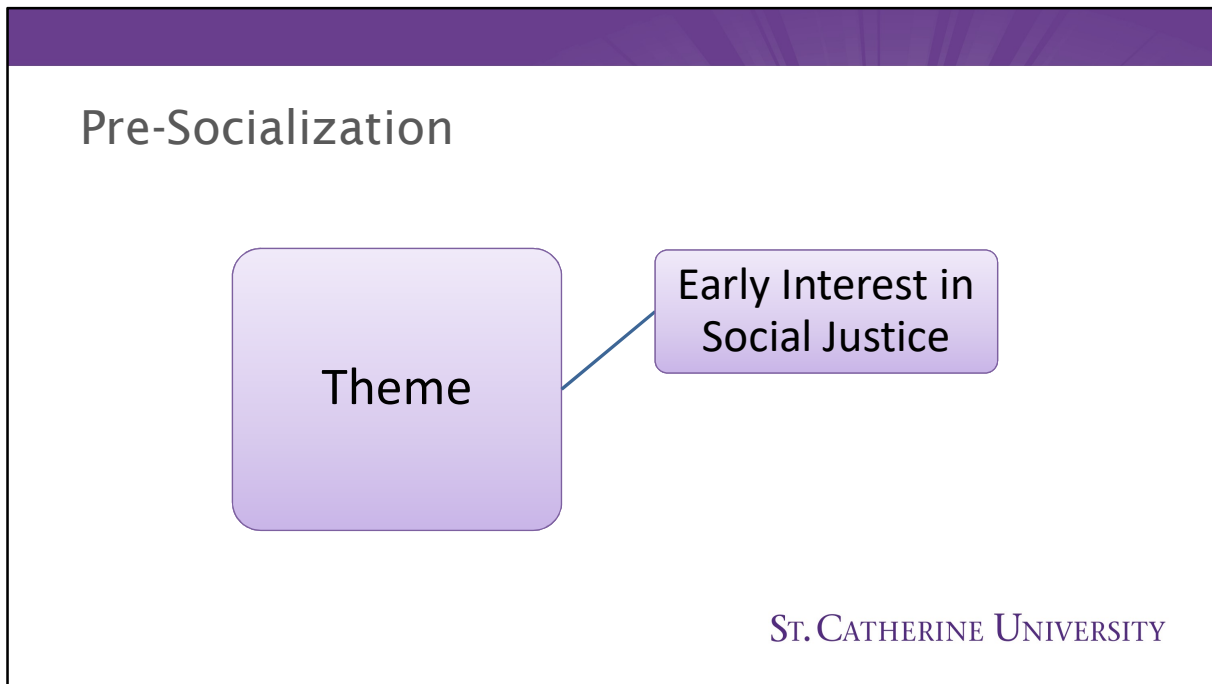
The final sample included 12 women and 2 men. Twelve of the participants identified as white, 1 as Asian-American (Chinese), and 1 as Native American (Ojibwe).

Each of the participants shared rich and detailed accounts of their journey in becoming a macro practice social worker. While it is not possible to share these accounts in depth, I would like to share some of the most salient themes which emerged across the different stages of socialization experiences.



Starting with the pre-socialization stage, there were three relevant themes I'd like to discuss: Early Interest in Social Justice, Role Models, and Micro-before-Macro.

FLIP



### **Early Interest in Social Justice**

Within the pre-socialization stage, nearly all of the respondents were involved in social action at very young ages, and came to social work with an interest in pursuing community and policy work

## Early Interest in Social Justice

"I had an earth club that I started with some of my friends, I can't remember how we raised money but we did have a shoe box and our ultimate goal was we were going to buy an acre of land to preserve it. It was me and my friend Janelle, probably elementary school...fourth grade, maybe. ...I actually found the shoe box a few years ago...and it wasn't enough to buy an acre of land [chuckles] but...I think it had 150 bucks in there...So, I actually donated it to the Nature Conservancy...this also probably led to some of my interest in macro practice...as I've gotten older I've gotten more interested in where environmental work and social work intersect."

*-Bethany*

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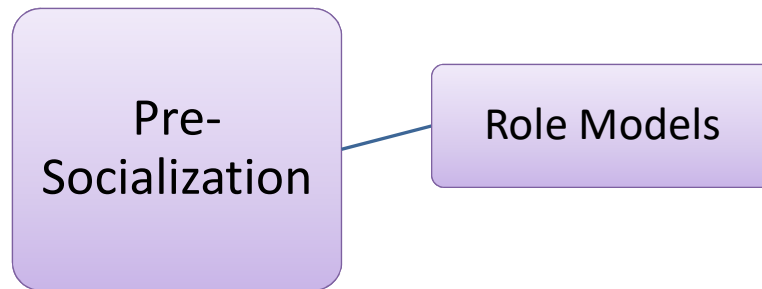
For example, this quote from Bethany, who works as a program manager for a nonprofit providing low-income housing, said READ QUOTE

Other interviewees for this study were involved in student government, LGBTQ rights, animal rights, and other social issues long before reaching their formal socialization stage. This means they were easily identifiable and could have been mentored and guided toward macro practice social work much earlier than any of them were. As a matter of fact, many of them described how they spent years searching for something they thought might exist, but until its discovery, they had no conceptualization of what it was they were looking for. The way they described it reminded me of the sudden illumination of a lightbulb in the darkness. They seemed to have a sense of serendipity involved in their discovery.

What this study doesn't explore are the number of individuals who may also have been interested and active in social justice issues at young ages, but chose to pursue education in fields other than social work, such as law, public health, political science, or public policy. Many of the respondents indicated considering these other fields prior to learning that they could do similar work through a degree in social work.



## Pre-Socialization



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Role models and mentors were found to be key for every respondent's decision to pursue macro practice social work. Interestingly, not all of these significant influences were social workers themselves. ... For Elizabeth, it was her undergraduate social work professor where she first hear the term *macro practice*. Isaac mentioned his high school history teacher as an early influence, introducing him to antiauthoritarian readings and sparking his initial interest in social justice issues. Nancy shared it was her Women's Studies advisor who helped her find a macro practice field placement for her undergraduate social work degree. Kaitlin and Megan both said it was friends already getting their MSW who first suggested they pursue macro practice social work. These friends were clinically oriented, but recognized social work had a place for those more interested in macro practice. FLIP

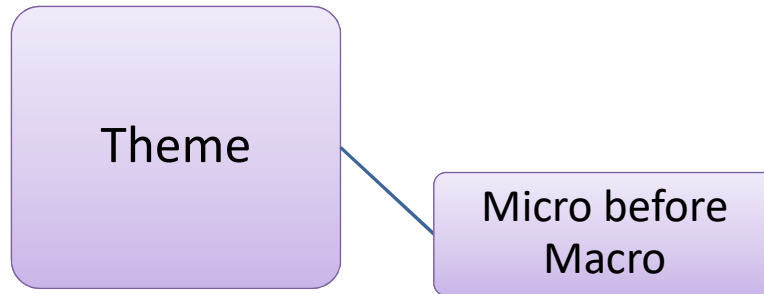
## Role Models

*I started doing direct practice social work and ended up as a case manager...So I really got to understand the broader systems that we work in like Medicaid...**And then I met a woman who had LGSW or LSW after her name on her business card and she was a lobbyist and that blew my mind.** I knew I wanted to go to grad school and realized that you can go to grad school to like this other side of social work and politics. -Diane*

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And finally for Diane, it was the lobbyist she describes in this quote whom she met while doing direct practice who opened her up to the possibility of doing social work at a macro practice level, Diane also talked about her father's influence in her ability to understand larger systems and their impact on individuals.

## Pre-Socialization



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A great deal of the discourse in this study was on the concept of *micro before macro*. Practitioners talked about the bias they experienced in this regard especially as they moved from the pre to the formal socialization stages and most prominently within the requirements for field experiences at the undergraduate level. Elizabeth and Nancy, who attended the same undergraduate social work program, said they were able to explore macro practice during their BSW, but found themselves having to ask for modifications or special accommodations from their professors.

## Micro before Macro

“There just weren’t options, there weren’t macro level options. And I didn’t want to do anything that was sort of front-line clinical in nature.”

*~Elizabeth*

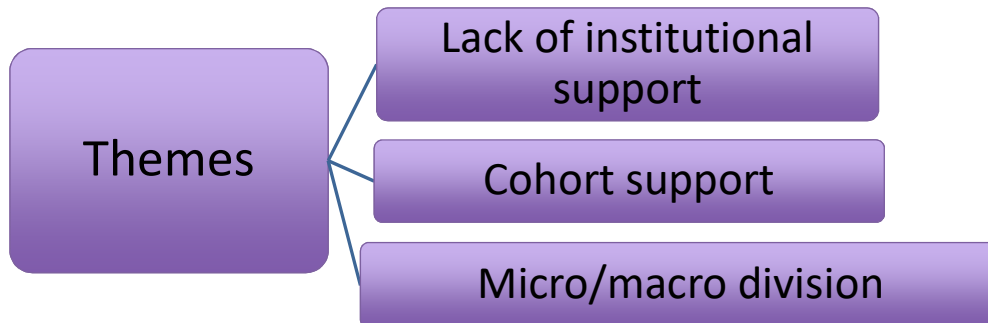
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In talking about a BSW field experience, Elizabeth said, “There just weren’t options, there weren’t macro level options. And I didn’t want to do anything that was sort of front-line clinical in nature.”

~Those who didn’t receive an undergraduate degree in social work obviously weren’t exposed to this kind of bias. However, this did come up again as a theme when they pursued their Master’s degree and needed to take direct practice classes and were required to participate in field experiences offering direct client contact.

~This expectation for micro before macro also led most participants to a type of negative anticipatory socialization in which experiences with direct practice showed them what they *didn’t* want to do

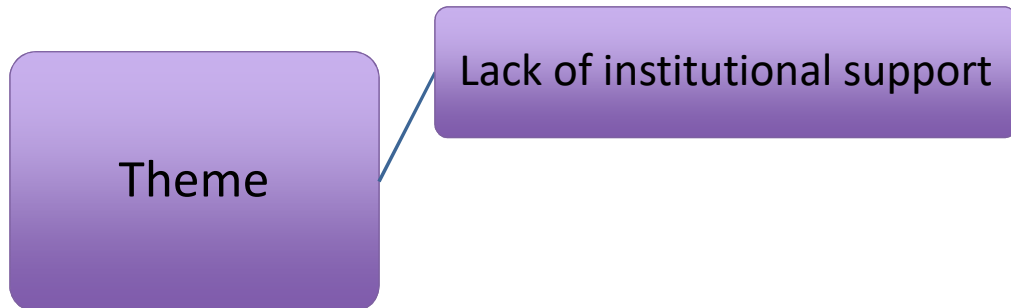
## Formal socialization experiences



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The next stage I explored with interviewees was their formal socialization experiences. The major themes of this stage included lack of support, cohort support and a micro/macro division

## Formal socialization experiences



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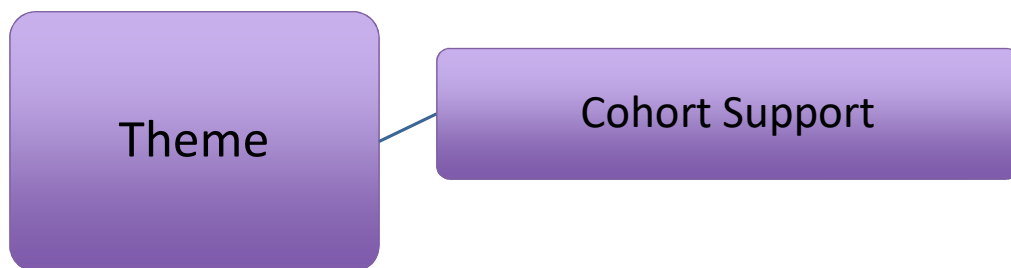
Within the formal socialization stage, respondents described feeling secondary, or like their macro practice concentration was just an “add-on” to the “real” purpose of the MSW program which was to train clinical and direct practice social workers. Many described having to create their own macro practice internships or settle for less than ideal placements.

*...most of my classes were taught by adjuncts. I think yeah and maybe **there's just a lesser value placed on some of the macro practice skills, among social workers?** They, they pick out of a crowd of adjuncts, that changes every year. -Amber*

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The use of adjunct faculty, while appreciated for their practical knowledge and experience, also seemed to signal to many of the respondents less of a value being placed upon their macro practice courses, as evidenced by this quote from Amber. All of the difficulties described occurred at schools which offered an MSW with a macro practice specialization.

## Formal socialization experiences



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Despite feeling unsupported in their MSW programs, another significant finding was the role of the cohort model in providing support and mentorship.

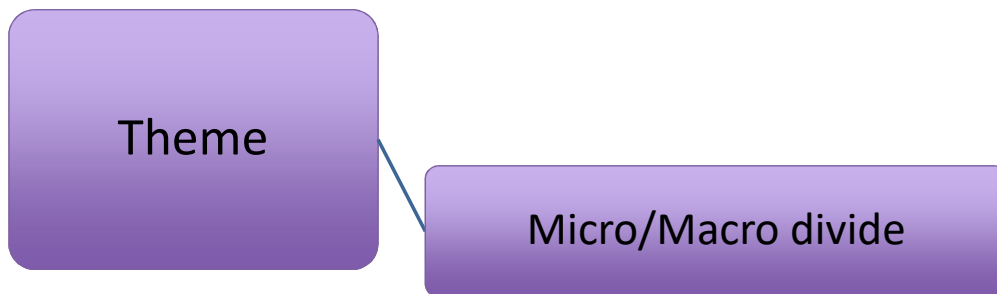


I spent a lot of time learning from, just latching myself onto other people who knew much more than I did. Classmates who had more experience. I was so green. I was so green. I tell people half of what I paid for... was access to my classmates, which is why going to class was so important to me because I knew I was learning just as much if not more from the discussions in class and engaging with people who were so different than the people I had previously interacted with. ~Megan

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For example, this quote from Megan is similar to how many others in the study described their MSW cohorts. It seems MSW programs do a good job in recruiting and bringing together students with a variety of experiences and similar objectives when it comes to their career goals.

## Formal socialization experiences

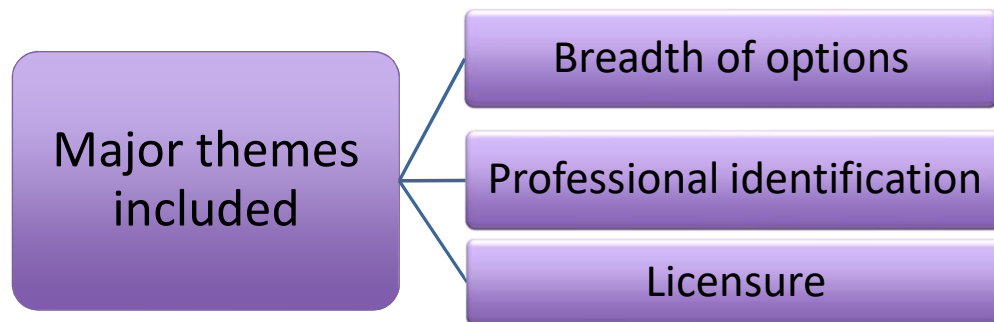


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Those in their foundation year of their MSW program, which is a year of generalist course work for students who don't already have an undergraduate, stated the division between micro and macro practice classmates was apparent right away. Most of the respondents talked about feeling misunderstood by their direct practice classmates and professors, or as Diane described, like they weren't doing "real" social work. Both Kaitlin and Grace said they felt supported only when they were "in the classes where I was surrounded by macro students."

They also talked about their micro classmates ascribing to a "knee-jerk" liberalism that shut down conversations and critical thinking in the classroom

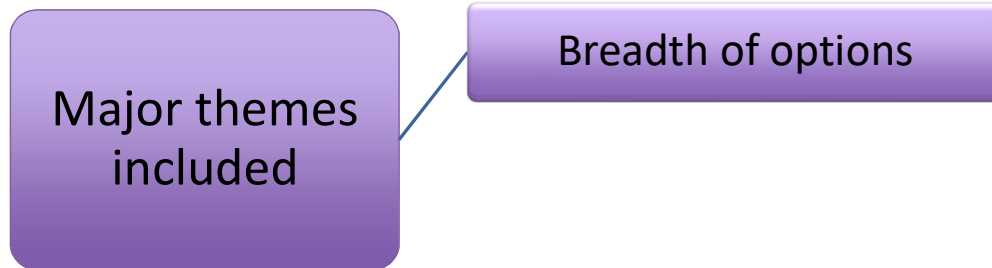
## Post-formal socialization experiences



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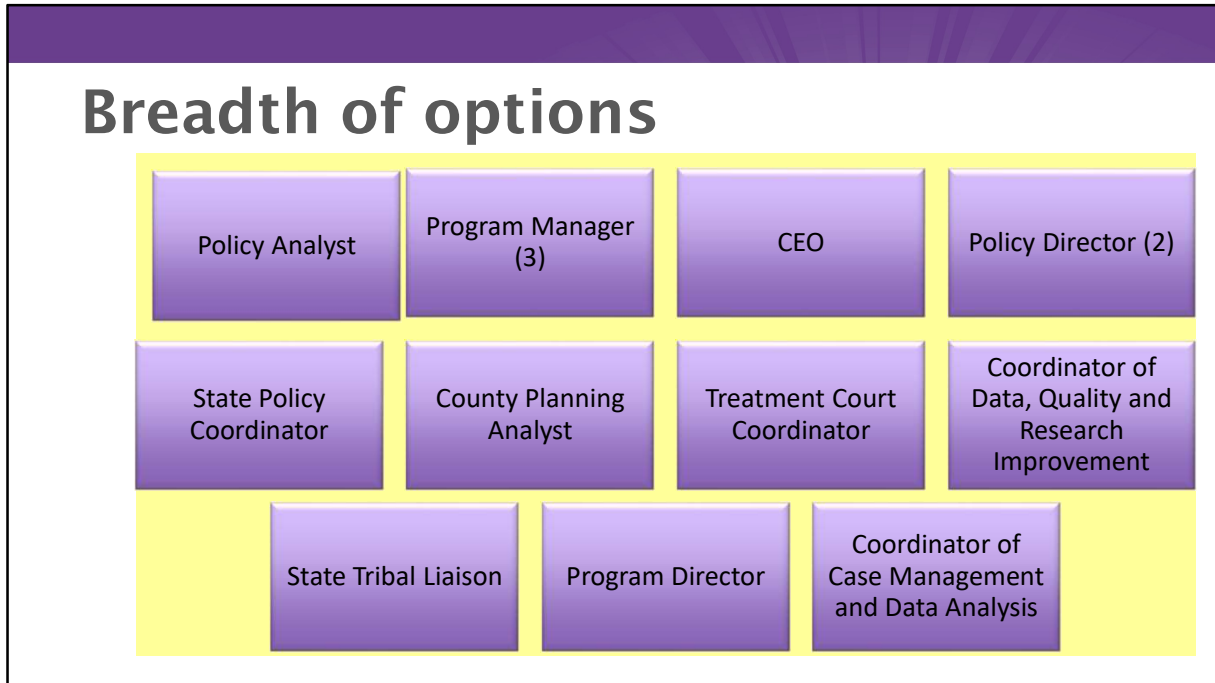
The final stage I explored with interviewees was their post formal socialization experiences which reflects the time after the education is complete and the professional enters into practice. For those I talked to the major themes were the breadth of options, professional identification, and the role of licensure

## Post-formal socialization experiences



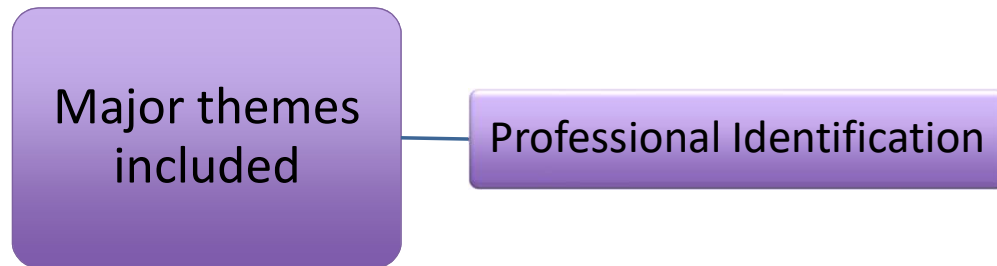
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Within the post-formal socialization stage, many of the interviewees commented on the breadth of employment options available to them after completing their MSW.



Here is a list of the titles held by those in my study. Difficulty finding desired employment was discussed by respondents, but this didn't seem to be of a significant magnitude to prevent individuals in my study from finding meaningful employment doing macro practice social work

## Post-formal socialization experiences



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The more common struggle for currently practicing professionals was tension over their identification as a social worker, especially when it came to their public identification. While interviewees in this study seemed to identify more strongly with social work during the formal socialization period, entering the workplace changed that for many.

## Professional identification

- *I mean, it's not a short answer. There are so many aspects to it. **It's easier when you're talking to another helper person.** There's already that foundational knowledge of what social work is.*  
– Laura
- *When I tell people I'm a social worker, they assume one thing and so instead of having to clarify that I'm **not that thing you're assuming, I just skip it altogether.*** –Grace

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Interviewees had a desire for greater recognition of their social work identity by others, but didn't take up the task of trying to defend and explain the value of macro practice social work. They talked about how engaging in these discussions takes a great deal of work and doesn't feel important enough for many of them to spend their time, energy or resources. However, as our conversation progressed, they seemed to move away from a focus on the benefit of recognition for themselves and started to recognize the benefit their identification might have for other current or future macro practice social workers.

## Post-formal socialization experiences

Major themes  
included

Licensure

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Regulation also came up as a barrier which impacts upon macro practice social work identity. In this study, participants who were not licensed feared calling themselves a social worker because of the legal ramifications. They were confused by the licensing process and relied upon what they had heard from peers to inform their understanding.



## Licensure

*I mean it's a confusing world in the first place. So there's no clear path for this. I still don't understand it and I guess I've just put that in the camp of I don't need to understand it because I'm not licensed and I'm not planning on getting licensed. -Kaitlin*

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Their concerns around licensing are not unfounded. In the U.S. there is a vast array of complicated and varying regulations from state to state. Legal definitions of what constitutes “social work” and who can call themselves a social worker also varies from state to state.

IF TIME: The participants were evenly split between licensed and unlicensed social workers. Each one made an intentional decision about whether or not they became licensed. Both groups had a variety of reasons for why they chose to pursue or avoid licensure. Opinions on licensure were much stronger among the unlicensed respondents. Among those who were unlicensed, confusion about whether their education and work activities required licensure was prominent. Nearly all of them said the licensure exam was not designed to test macro practice knowledge. Others cited the cost of the exam, licensing fees, CEUs, and supervision as burdensome, irrelevant or unnecessary for their work. Most of them saw the value of licensure for those engaged in clinical practice, but did not think the same public protection goal should be applied to their work. Several said if there were a license specifically for macro social work they would consider being licensed

## Next Steps and Moving Forward



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~Of course completing this study raised more questions for the field of social work. How do these stories compare with other populations, in other parts of the United States or in other countries? Comparative research on the lived experiences of direct practice social workers could also be done to see if the themes and ideas learned in this study are unique to macro practice social work, or more representative of the field overall.

~Operating from the arguable assumption that neither isolation nor loss of the macro practice side of social work is desirable, I believe the implications of these experiences are such that significant institutional changes are required in order to more fully integrate and support the professional socialization of these practitioners. This requires a serious examination of the profession's aspirational values versus its lived practice at the educational, policy, research and practice levels. Changing the perception of macro practice social work, improving and strengthening the curriculum, and reforming the regulatory climate, requires the desire, will and action by our professional institutions as well as individual practitioners. A combined grassroots and grassstops movement is necessary if we want to move the profession's aspirational value of social justice into one that is lived.

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Thank you, I look forward to our discussion and your questions