Post-Master's Career Progression of Social Workers: A Developmental Perspective

Dawn Apgar
Katherine Dolan

Abstract: *Social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the nation with an expected job growth of 9% by the end of the decade and more than 62,888 Masters of Social Work (MSW) students in the United States in 2021 (BLS, 2022; CSWE, 2023). The receipt of a graduate social work degree represents an important milestone, often accompanied by entry into professional practice. While much is written about formal social work education, scholarly literature has far fewer articles about the work life of social workers after graduation. This article presents social work career progression from a developmental perspective, an approach that has historically been used to examine the life course of clients. Typical tasks or "milestones" in early, middle, and later stages of clinical or direct practice careers are discussed. Adapting life course theory to examine the professional evolution of social workers is beneficial as it helps illuminate the typical stressors facing practitioners after completing their formal education. Understanding potential career opportunities and issues may help those entering social work to better socialize into the profession and transition from one stage to the next by anticipating what lies ahead. Using a developmental perspective to professionalization is also appropriate as, like in the life course, opportunities for growth should be ongoing and lifelong. Early, middle, and later career opportunities and challenges are identified within the three pillars of social work – regulation, education, and practice. Policy reforms to enhance social work licensure portability, life-long learning in the form of continuing education, and self-care practices will assist social workers to thrive in all career stages.*

Keywords: *Professional development; supervision; licensure; career development*

Professional development of social workers is critical to competent practice with clients. While the literature contains articles about the motivations of those entering the profession (Runell, 2020), scholarly works that examine the career progression of practicing social workers are more difficult to find. The lack of guidance provided to social workers as they transition from students to practitioners is surprising as the responsibilities required to provide competent care are numerous and the workplace stressors are significant (Burghardt, 2021; NASW, 2021a). Research indicates guidance by others, in the form of mentorship and supervision, has positive impacts that result in more skillful practice and better client engagement (Wilkins et al., 2018). While universally accepted as beneficial, the content and type of supervision given to social workers varies depending upon whether they are newly qualified practitioners or are later in their career progression (O'Donoghue & Engelbrecht, 2021). These modifications result from the changing needs of social workers as they grow professionally and are consistent with using a developmental perspective to understand the professional life course.

Dawn Apgar, PhD, LSW, ACSW, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, College of Arts and Sciences, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. Katherine Dolan, MSW, graduate of Seton Hall University and Columbia University.

Social workers often assist others with successfully making life transitions, but research aimed at helping social workers with career progression focuses mostly on transitioning between public and private sectors (Austin et al., 2012), changing service focus (Gustavson et al., 2020), or mitigating the negative impacts of retirement (McFadden et al., 2020). Social workers may look to more experienced colleagues to assist with anticipating their professional futures as the scholarly literature is devoid of a conceptual framework specific to social workers. This haphazard approach is interesting for a profession that takes such care in documenting typical developmental milestones of those served.

In this article, the authors examine the expected achievements of social workers during the early, middle, and later stages of their careers after earning an MSW degree. Given that more than half of professionals earn MSWs - the terminal degree in social work - and most social workers enter professional practice at the master's level (CSWE, 2021), specific attention is needed on ensuring a smooth transition from the classroom to professional practice for this target group. A social worker's developmental stages are not age-related as some enter the profession in early adulthood while others discover social work as a second career. However, regardless of age, typically social workers wrestle with similar tasks associated with the three pillars of social work – regulation, education, and practice – in various stages of their careers. While the experiences of social workers can vary depending on practice specialty, work setting, etc., common challenges in each professional stage are consistent based upon a review of the professional and practice literature. Memorializing these 'milestones' is useful for both practitioners and supervisors. Social workers can use this information to anticipate work activities and transitions, helping them be adequately prepared. Supervisors can help gauge professional development of supervisees based on the identified stages, providing support as needed.

Literature Review

Understanding human development is critical in social work for understanding client problems and developing sound treatment plans. Developmentalists break the life course into stages to highlight the importance of the growth process. Such a framework can be appropriately used to conceptualize the various segments of a professional career, though no such application exists in social work academic journals to date. Career development theories promote understanding of areas such as self-efficacy and aptitude; however, social workers would benefit from a framework that speaks directly to their professional underpinning.

Key concepts of developmental theory are briefly reviewed so that its application to career progression of social workers can be better understood. Subsequently, the common tasks facing early, middle, and later career social work professionals are described. Lastly, micro, mezzo, and macro strategies for supporting practitioners at all career stages are presented as recommendations for the future.

Conceptual Framework: Developmental Theory

Social workers learn the life course perspective as understanding human behavior is important for engaging and assessing clients, competencies that must be demonstrated prior to graduation according to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2022). Both engagement and assessment are critical steps in problem-solving, the basis of the planned change process used to assist clients with ameliorating problems. Hutchinson (2018) states that the life course is a path that often involves continuities, twists, and turns. A life course perspective sees humans as capable of making choices and constructing their own life journeys, within systems of opportunities and constraints. Central to a life course perspective is the notion that people in a particular cohort experience events in the same sequence and at the same point in a trajectory. This path has patterns of stability and change that usually includes transitions. Within developmental theory, changes in roles and statuses are identified as transitions. Transitions mark changes in events that may produce long-lasting effects.

While developmental theory aims to provide some predictability to the future, as well as provide normative contexts for current challenges, individual experiences do not always follow the same course. Development can be impacted by cultural and ethnic norms, socio-economic factors, and other life circumstances (Amso et al., 2019; Roby & Scott, 2022). These factors can impact career progression, including in social work (Womack & Shi, 2022); however, these effects on the professional development of social workers are much less studied (Brooks & Clunis, 2007).

While some prominent theorists studying adult and career development link stages to chronological age (Levinson, 1986; Super, 1990), a review of the literature indicates that dividing development into three distinct phases that occur sequentially after beginning to work in a profession is appropriate and supported by empirical data (Slocum & Cron, 1985). While there is no consensus of what time periods constitute one's early, middle, and later career, the first decade (up to 10 years) appears to represent the initial skill-building or trial stage of development (early career), the second decade (11-20 years) represents a period of stabilization (mid-career), and the remaining years of employment (21 or more years) represent maintenance as workers enter the later stages of employment. Career stages using these time frames were used in an American Psychological Association workforce study, though "late senior career" (31 or more years) experiences were also tracked, with findings indicating that employment hours in this phase decreased as many professionals entered retirement (Stamm et al., 2017, p. 1).

Using a developmental perspective to describe career progression has value. Social workers can experience different stressors as they acclimate to workplace demands after graduation and assume more supervisory and other responsibility in their positions over time. Employment trajectories can also have significant positive or negative impacts on the financial, social, and emotional well-being of workers during their life course (Henretta, 2003). Understanding the common experiences of social workers in the early, middle, or later stages of their careers may assist those entering the profession, as well as supervisors and administrators charged with facilitating successful career advancement. The following sections describe the major foci, as depicted in Table 1, associated with each stage as they

relate to regulation, education, and practice.

Table 1. *Summary of Major Developmental Foci for Social Workers Within Each Career Stage*

Career Stage	Education	Regulation	Practice
Early	Translate academic knowledge to practical application	Navigate eligibility requirements & regulations to obtain licensure	Secure employment
	Participate in lifelong learning opportunities to gain knowledge & meet ethical & regulatory obligations	Secure appropriate supervision	Build resiliency skills
Mid	Seek advanced degrees, certifications, & training	Meet requirements to maintain licensure	Balance personal & professional responsibilities
	Advance supervisory & teaching skills	Manage practice risk	Expand the scope of one's career by venturing into new roles with more responsibilities
Later	Transition to a mentor role to extend knowledge & train new social workers	Leverage career experience & knowledge to inform policies & regulations	Prepare for termination by succession planning & getting ready for retirement

Stage: Early Career

Early in their careers, social workers focus on continued skill acquisition and identity formation as they transition from roles as students to professionals in the world of work. Acclimating to a professional environment outside the classroom requires recent graduates to put academic knowledge into action, continue education formally and informally, and assume workplace responsibilities. The literature indicates most social workers first entering the profession after graduation feel unprepared, and do not have a firm sense of professional identity (Hochman et al., 2022; Spivak et al., 2021). This perceived lack of preparedness is concerning, as the early, formative years of a career serve as a foundation for opportunities and challenges social workers face. New social workers navigate personal, educational, and professional pressures in the early stage of their career as they must develop and hone their knowledge and skills, begin satisfying regulatory requirements to gain licensure, and adjust to the vast differences between classroom settings and professional environments. Despite intensive preparation through the rigors of accredited academic programs, early career social workers can easily become overwhelmed, experience burnout, and question their commitment to their chosen profession, making adequate support and supervision critical within this stage (Glassburn, 2020).

Education

Education requirements of early career social workers include transitioning from formal to informal learning, adopting lifelong learning practices, and navigating the opportunities and challenges associated with continuing one's education to meet the practice demands espoused in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2021a). New social workers move away from structured education, often done in classrooms, to learning 'on the job' within professional settings. Students are given access to university and department support, as required by CSWE (2022) accreditation standards, to help them problem-solve and navigate the process of earning their graduate degrees. Prior to graduation, students are presented numerous opportunities to advance their knowledge and skills through formal classes, workshops, field placements, and supervision. These opportunities are organized for students, readily available, and typically included in the cost of tuition.

New social workers must transition between environments with clear expectations and available resources (academic settings) to those in which resources may not be readily available and formal education has less priority (professional settings). Voll et al. (2022) discuss the difference between "knowing-that" and "knowing-how," which aptly applies to early career social workers entering the field. While "knowing-that" refers to recall and understanding of concepts and theories, "knowing-how" requires translating knowledge into action and is consistent with the competency-based approach which has been adopted in social work (CSWE, 2022). As mandated by the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2021a), social workers must engage in lifelong learning, as they intervene with clients in changing socioeconomic and political environments. To do so, social workers must locate and attend continuing education presentations, retain the information they absorb (knowing-that), and thoroughly understand how to apply the information within the context of their employment settings in relevant and equitable ways (knowing-how).

After graduation, early career social workers have fewer professional supports and greater workplace demands, causing them to possibly feel ill-prepared to handle new challenges. When graduates become employed and move to professional settings, structures and routines vary. While the priority of academic institutions is student learning, professional organizations focus on workplace responsibilities and fulfillment of roles needed. Responsibilities may be diverse and changing, often extending beyond the scope of initial employment offers. Social workers hired in settings such as schools may be the only employees in their work environment with social work training. Educational opportunities may be few and far between, social workers may be required to take time off to attend them, and the cost of offerings are often assumed by employees themselves. Thus, social workers must often learn informally through mentorship or conversing with more experienced coworkers.

Academic literature is limited in its assessment of the accessibility of continuing education opportunities for social workers. Social work is considered an underpaid profession (Proctor, 2017; Wermeling, 2013), which may impact choices made by social workers about the type and number of continuing education courses they take annually due to affordability. Whether educational seminars are in-person or hosted virtually may also affect social workers' decisions to participate. Support provided by employers impacts

accessibility; access to childcare, and cost of seminars and transportation, as well as use of unpaid time off, are barriers that can prevent early career social workers from not gaining additional education, despite a desire and/or need to do so (Carnahan et al., 2016).

Early career social workers often face additional financial burdens due to substantial student loan debt. Loan debt for MSW graduates has increased by almost 50% over the past ten years, averaging close to $50,000 in 2020 (CSWE, 2021). Recent MSW graduates may also find themselves grappling with loan debt accumulated during their baccalaureate programs with Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students possessing an average of about $28,000 in student loan debt (CSWE, 2021). Educational debt is higher among Black and Hispanic social workers, demonstrating a racial disparity between borrowers (Salsberg et al., 2020). Despite the growth in loan debt, salaries among social workers have increased only modestly. The average income for a new social worker with an MSW is almost $48,000 (Salsberg et al., 2020) compared to an average of $44,200 in 2012 (Keziah, 2014). Financial pressure associated with loan debt and salary dissatisfaction are exacerbated by the slow progression of wage growth within the social work profession (Burghardt, 2021). Some social workers leave the profession due to financial pressures, coupled with caregiving responsibilities. A recent British study found that social workers in the United Kingdom have a very short working life period as compared with all health service professionals, with the difference not explained by gender-related familial roles (Curtis et al., 2010; Wermeling, 2013).

Regulation

Social workers are licensed in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the United States, with many jurisdictions requiring licensure prior to working in the field. As most states do not regulate the activities of students engaged in field practicums, graduates are surprised to find they can no longer do the work they did prior to graduation without taking an examination (in some jurisdictions), paying fees, and completing necessary paperwork. In addition, many jurisdictions require background checks, as the primary purpose of licensure is consumer protection. The many regulatory demands placed on early career social workers may pose unanticipated barriers to realizing their intended career plans.

Licensing increases social workers' access to specialized roles, enhances salary potential, and holds social workers to a legal standard of competency and commitment to ethical practice (Monahan, 2016). While the benefits of licensing are abundant, the process of becoming licensed is not straightforward. Social workers must meet specific education and supervised experience standards to obtain desired licenses. Geographical, economic, racial, and other barriers also prevent aspiring licensees from obtaining necessary credentials (Kim, 2022). The financial burden of licensing fees, as well as the necessary exams to obtain licensure, present difficulties for new social workers, especially those who are struggling to find employment or have student loan debt (Knepper et al., 2022). Black social workers have, on average, $35,000 more in educational debt, as compared with White social workers, with $21,000 attributed to earning their MSWs. Thus, the need to get licensed and obtain employment quickly may be even more pressing for early career professionals of color (Salsberg et al., 2020).

Variability among state licensure is quite high, including titles of licenses, number of supervised hours of experience necessary, types of supervision, and continuing education requirements, leading to many questions by early career professionals concerning jurisdictional differences and requirements. State regulation variability may impact career mobility and time needed to become licensed. Social workers who are licensed to practice in one state may not be eligible for a license in another state due to eligibility differences, which can limit the locations where social workers can practice. There were enhanced portability allowances during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure continuity of care as individuals moved to other jurisdictions to socially distance, though some of these reciprocity provisions have since expired (Apgar, 2022). The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) offers social workers online tools to help identify the requirements of each state license (ASWB, 2021). States may require supervision within the employment setting unless certain criteria are met. Without appropriate supervisors in agencies, early career social workers can be forced to hire external supervisors, at their own expense, if they are allowed to use them (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs [NJDCA], 2022). The complexity of social work regulation and requirements for licensure can leave early career social workers surprised, confused, and even frustrated as they discover additional demands beyond their graduate degrees to do the work that inspired them to enter the profession initially. Additionally, a report by ASWB indicates racial and other disparities in passing licensure exams, which means that some early career social workers may experience additional hardships in meeting the requirements for licensure (ASWB, 2022). Delays in licensure result in lost job opportunities and lower wages which are unanticipated given the positive job outlook for those entering the profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2022; Salsberg et al., 2017).

Practice

Social workers enter new professional environments that can inhibit the use of learned skills and knowledge and meeting employment expectations. New social workers need enhanced formal and informal occupational support. Induction and orientation, supervision, and assistance with identity development are particularly important for new social workers. Recent graduates often hope to transfer skills and knowledge gained in past field placements as they attempt to fulfill employment responsibilities, which depends upon the degree that their employment settings and expectations are similar to their past practicums (Glassburn, 2020). Student interns are closely supervised, unable to conduct certain tasks due to legality and confidentiality concerns, and often serve reduced numbers of clients. Professionals may not receive formal supervision, are held liable for legal concerns, and often experience overwhelming numbers of clients with intense needs. Deadlines, expectations, and responsibilities of full-time employment are more stringent than field placement protocols, which put recent graduates at risk of experiencing "reality shock," whereby initial or anticipated perceptions and expectations of the workplace do not match what is actually experienced (Bates et al., 2010).

Along with differing expectations, types of work skills completed inside the classroom may also differ from work completed in professional environments. Students author academic research papers, participate in role plays, and take exams. In professional

settings, production expectations include one-on-one or group sessions with clients, policy writing, recordkeeping, and other hands-on interventions. Studies show that many students feel ill-prepared by their academic education (Tham & Lynch, 2020; Voll et al., 2022) while other students have feelings of preparedness (Choi et al., 2021). While social work accreditation standards are consistent across MSW programs, operating practices across agency settings, 'rules' that dictate workplace etiquette and service delivery, vary greatly. Adequate induction and orientation to the workplace are essential for new employees to adjust to their new environments and be successful in their positions, though a study of early career social workers in the United Kingdom found that 88% had difficulty fitting in training and 63% felt that they did not get enough supervision in their first year in the job (Burke, 2012).

Social workers are charged with connecting theory to practice in these new and varying environments, making workplace orientation vital. Factors such as robust induction to the workplace, appropriate supervision, and clear perceptions of their role as a social worker positively impact those new to the profession (Choi et al., 2021; Cleveland et al., 2019). Orientation and pre-service training often include in-depth information about the technical skills necessary for successful job performance, information regarding the operational systems used by agencies, organizational leadership styles, administrative requirements, and requisite communication processes appropriate for partner agencies and clients. New professionals with inadequate pre-service training have described their transition from the classroom to the workplace as a "baptism of fire" (Bates et al., 2010, p. 162). Without support and guidance from administrators and thorough review of agency policies, newly hired social workers are at greater risk of malpractice (Reamer, 2015).

Early career social workers often feel emotionally overwhelmed by blurred boundaries between work and home life, a lack of supervision, and a strong disconnect between their perception of the world during their MSW programs compared to the reality seen from a professional perspective (Segev et al., 2022). Social work is portrayed to students in MSW programs as a helping profession that makes great strides in enhancing human well-being. However, common hierarchical and bureaucratic barriers often inhibit or slow progression of systemic change, disillusioning new workers who now realize making real differences in the lives of their clients and broader changes among communities, is likely to be more difficult than they initially thought due to factors beyond their control (Segev et al., 2022). Given that social workers are particularly susceptible to burnout (Grant & Kinman, 2014), building resiliency skills in the early stages of a social work career helps social workers better navigate the emotional and mental demands of the profession. Factors such as peer support, good communication skills, setting work and non-work boundaries, structured work routines and self-reflection have each contributed to increased resiliency among social workers (Cleveland et al., 2019).

Recent graduates may also experience a lack of confidence in their skillset. It is common for those entering the profession to experience imposter syndrome or to doubt their abilities (Urwin, 2017). Despite demonstrating practice behaviors necessary for competent social work practice prior to graduation, new social workers may still feel as though they do not have the abilities needed to appropriately work with clients. Lack of experience in working with the complex issues seen in the field can cause new social

workers to question their abilities, mistrust their confidence, and seek reassurance from supervisors and/or others for guidance.

Supervision is vital, and often required, for new social workers, especially those who seek licensure. The literature lacks consensus about the amount and types of supervision required for new social workers. Often, supervision is dictated by resources, licensure requirements, specialization (clinical versus macro), and/or accreditation or regulatory standards. Social workers who receive supervision usually value the social/emotional support obtained and the knowledge gained from more experienced supervisors and welcome the opportunities for feedback on their work (Borders et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2015). Receiving feedback and positive reinforcement is extremely important for the professional growth of early career social workers and assists them to develop resiliency skills that are critical for sustained competent practice as they move into mid-career social work practice.

Professional membership organizations provide a wide range of services to and on behalf of social workers. Founded in 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is one of the largest membership organizations of professional social workers in the world, with more than 120,000 members (NASW, n.d.). While social work students are encouraged to join through significantly discounted student dues structures, many social workers do not realize the networking and other benefits until after graduation. State and local chapter activities serve as opportunities for learning about service availability and job opportunities in provider organizations, as well as receiving formal and informal continuing education instruction. Access to liability insurance is also viewed as a substantial reason for joining or maintaining membership (Davis et al., 2021). While early career social workers find the information and resources provided by NASW valuable, a survey by Davis et al. (2021) found many social workers questioned the value of their membership, especially if not active, given the high yearly membership costs that continue to increase over time. Enhancing ways to be involved and solidifying the value of offerings will be necessary for social workers to stay connected or join NASW as they move into the middle stage of their careers.

Mid-Career Stage

As social workers gain more practice experience, their understanding of the profession, generally, and their specialized areas of practice expand. Mid-career professionals often continue to develop their knowledge and skills, take on more responsibility, and gain interest in earning practice certifications and credentials. Mid-career social workers may continue their work in a chosen specialization or seek employment in a different area of practice. After gaining experience, social workers in clinical practice often have an opportunity to work for themselves or others in private practice. They may start the transition slowly by having part-time private practices until they have enough clients to constitute full-time employment and a steady income. Social workers then may decide to leave agency employment completely, enjoying the ability to set their own hours and be freed from the bureaucratic processes that often accompany agency-based practice. While the exact number of social workers in private practice is

unknown, workforce data indicate that 23% of social workers with MSWs are employed in for-profit companies, businesses or individual businesses, with an additional 4% being self-employed (Salsberg et al., 2017). While not all of these social workers are in solo or group private practices, these percentages indicate that a substantial proportion of social workers are in non-agency or governmental settings, perhaps due to the financial and other advantages that urged social workers to consider such work more than 50 years ago (Kurzman, 1976).

Social workers who transition to administrative roles may need additional education to ensure they have the competency and project management skillset to assume leadership roles. Training in entrepreneurship and business may be required for social workers to be successful in owning and operating private practices. Macro social workers working in policy-related domains may eventually seek an elected position, also requiring a new set of skills they may not have anticipated.

For some, mid-career social work can be particularly challenging given growing demands associated with parenting, caregiving of aging parents, and enhanced professional opportunities. While the life circumstances of social workers vary significantly, recognizing that there may be additional pressures present in the lives of mid-career social workers is important. The lack of resources available to address complex issues and the challenges of trying to meet client needs with inadequate resources can result in emotional and mental exhaustion. Social workers who developed resiliency strategies and coping skills early in their careers fare better as protective factors are more likely to slow burnout and compassion fatigue (Ostadhashemi et al., 2019; Padín et al., 2020). While early career social workers often focus their learning on how to operate in their employment settings and become licensed, middle career social workers seek advanced training to maintain the licenses they worked so hard to get.

Education

Middle career social workers often need to meet continuing education requirements for license renewal as licenses that allow professionals to provide services independently often require continuing education hours. Slightly more than half of all degreed social workers are licensed (Salsberg et al., 2017), creating great demand for new and specialized training opportunities for those who already have experience in the field. While some states restrict the types of offerings that can be used for license renewals, social workers who are mid-career recognize the value of interdisciplinary education and seek out offerings taught by allied professionals due to their value, regardless of whether they are required for licensure. Social workers may also seek out courses that are required for specialty certifications in areas such as addiction and gerontology. For social workers who are already licensed, specialized certifications are appealing as they demonstrate competency beyond the minimum standards associated with licensure. Social workers who do not work directly with clients may not seek licensure but continue to keep up with changing policies and trends to inform their work, topics that are often covered in continuing education courses.

Social workers may explore new education opportunities as they continue to learn about social work specialties, client populations, and the demands imposed by systemic

issues. Doctoral programs, such as those awarding Doctor of Social Work (DSW) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in social work degrees, are often appealing to social workers who wish to advance their skills and education as well as distinguish themselves from colleagues. While the MSW is the terminal degree for social work, earning a DSW or a PhD increases salary potential and employment opportunities; professionals with DSWs or PhDs earn between $20,000 and $25,000 more than those who have MSWs (Salsberg et al., 2018). The demands of doctoral programs can be taxing on students. Expense, length of program, and the difficulty of maintaining full-time employment during enrollment act as barriers (Thyer, 2019). Admission and retention rates of non-White students are low among research-based social work doctoral programs (Ghose et al., 2018). Financial barriers, experiences with racism, and a lack of diversity among faculty often prevent non-White social workers from pursuing or finishing these degrees (Ghose et al., 2018). However, targeted efforts have been made by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the CSWE to provide financial assistance and mentoring to increase the number of minority students who earn doctorates, with SREB hoping that these doctoral graduates will choose to become faculty at colleges and universities and serve as role models for and mentors to others (CSWE, n.d.; SREB, n.d.).

There are approximately 6,595 part-time faculty members teaching in accredited social work programs, representing more than half of all social work educators (CSWE, 2023). Mid-career social workers may decide to take on adjunct roles to develop their teaching and supervisory skills through classroom instruction and give back to the social work profession (i.e., the value of service), both of which have been found to be rewarding (Hitchcock & Marquart, 2023). However, many social workers interested in being part-time instructors do not know how to get started and what is required of them in these roles. Hitchcock and Marquart (2023) warn that teaching comes with challenges, such as managing conflicts, grading, and dealing with the non-academic issues that affect students' academic performance. Many adjuncts do not know how to connect with other social work instructors and administrators in their programs or have limited time due to balancing full-time work with teaching, which can lead to feelings of isolation. Mid-career social workers must consider if they are ready to spend the estimated 7 to 12 hours weekly of out-of-classroom time required for each course taught as a part-time lecturer role. Becoming a field instructor can be a more feasible alternative to adjunct teaching, though some professionals do both. Mid-career social workers often have become field instructors as a way to strengthen the learning culture within their employment settings and demonstrate the importance of professional development to colleagues in their places of employment (Globerman & Bogo, 2003).

Regulation

As social workers advance in their careers, they become more familiar with laws and regulations associated with the profession; of particular concern is management of risk which can lead to malpractice claims, whether they are substantiated or not. While the prevalence of malpractice claims among social workers is relatively low compared to other professionals (Reamer, 2015), it is important social workers understand potential risks and the inherent tension that exists working in practice environments that often lack adequate

resources. Common allegations in social work malpractice lawsuits and complaints are those involving breaches of confidentiality, practitioner impairment, and incompetence (Reamer, 2015). Social workers who engage in malpractice face suspension or total loss of license and/or termination of employment, as well as difficulty finding future employment in the field as disciplinary actions are usually made public.

It is important that social workers in this career stage take note of their mental and physical health to ensure they do not negatively impact service delivery. Risk management becomes more challenging for mid-career social workers as they are often likely to be in supervisory or administrative positions, called upon to deal with more challenging clients and situations, and are now responsible for the actions of others who report to them.

Maintaining licensure requires additional commitments such as tracking renewal time frames and continuing education credits. License renewal standards vary by state, with annual renewal required in some states and multi-year regulatory periods in others. Continuing education requirements depend on jurisdiction and license category. Social workers who are licensed may no longer require formal supervision to legally practice, though, ongoing supervision for middle and later career social workers is encouraged for ongoing emotional and educational support.

Mid-career social workers often shift roles as they begin to supervise those who are entering the field. Many social workers enter supervisory positions with little training on how to properly function in these roles and use their own experiences as a supervisee to guide them. If supervision is going to be used to assist others to gain licenses for independent practice, mid-career social workers who are providing the supervision need to be aware of varying jurisdictional standards. While new supervisors may be eager to share their knowledge and guide developing professionals, supervisory roles can be challenging without support. Supervisors often report feeling unprepared for their new roles, even with years of experience in the field (Zhou, 2022). While supervisors help others enhance their direct practice skills by leaning on their own as examples, supervisors must also utilize a different set of skills in these new roles. Leadership training has been found to be particularly important to assist mid-career social workers with this adjustment (Zhou, 2022).

Practice

While some social workers in the mid-career stage assume managerial roles in agency settings, others opt to open their own private practices. Private practice can increase flexibility in work scheduling, allow autonomy in choosing clinical specializations, and increase compensation, while alleviating the need to conform to the managerial styles of others. Social workers who are self-employed or are in small group practices may experience negative effects of isolation such as a lack of peer and supervisory support (NASW, 2011). Access to peer consultation, while voluntary, can provide practitioners with an informal opportunity to gain guidance and clarity in risky or confusing situations.

Mid-career social workers may decide to move to different organizations as they now have experience that can lead to opportunities for career growth. Additionally, mid-career

social workers often have increasing family responsibilities or face familial relocation, which results in changing practice jurisdictions. Career mobility within the social work profession is limited by a lack of license portability. Practicing across state lines presents legality concerns, as licensing requirements vary state-to-state, meaning social workers who are already licensed to practice in one state may not be allowed to practice in another. The creation of an interstate licensure compact, funded by a grant received by ASWB, is currently underway with implementation targeted in the coming years (NASW, 2021b). However, whether there will be legislative support in at least seven states needed to realize the compact or the degree to which it will assist with license portability of social workers is still unknown.

Lastly, mid-career social workers often find themselves with enhanced opportunities to engage in mezzo or macro practice. Those in the social work field often work closely with individuals and families in the early part of their careers, and then move into mezzo- or macro-level work, as they see the need for advocacy and the impact that policy changes can make on the lives of others. While some have asserted that all social work practice should include micro, mezzo, and macro practice, the transition from direct to indirect practice often occurs over time as social workers move into supervisory or administrative positions (Burghardt, 2013; Finn & Molloy, 2021).

Later Career Stage

Much of the professional literature about later stage career progression focuses on transitioning to retirement (Gettings & Anderson, 2018). In the life course, Erikson (1994) suggests later adulthood is important to find meaning and satisfaction rather than to become bitter and disillusioned. Central to social work is the strengths perspective, which posits growth and development are perpetual with individuals being valuable contributors to both their own well-being and that of others. This stage of social work career progression focuses on generativity or nurturing others or charities that continue to work to make positive changes in the future. Social workers in the later stages of their careers often turn their attention to mentorship or providing supervision in the spirit of moving beyond their own achievements and helping others to achieve success. Role shifts in education and practice often occur while regulatory tasks are less predominant, though challenges associated with changing jurisdictions due to retirement moves or putting licenses on inactive status can present themselves.

Education

The importance of teaching others is instilled in the educational preparation for the profession with social workers learning from more experienced practitioners in field education in their undergraduate and/or graduate programs. Social workers in the later stages of their careers have witnessed firsthand the impact that formal and informal training and supervision can have on learning and development. As field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education (CSWE, 2022), much professional preparation has occurred under the guidance of practitioners in the field. Research indicates field education is highly rated by students as instrumental in their professional preparation (Bogo, 2006)

and the feedback received from their field instructors helps with developing essential social work skills (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Field instructors guide students through their field practicums, performing a myriad of professional skills including modeling, coordinating, mediating, teaching, and evaluating.

Social workers are often 'called' to give back later in their careers through formal or informal education of future generations of practitioners. The profession is predominately comprised of women (85% of those with MSWs or above) and those who are White (73% of those with MSWs or above) (Salsberg et al., 2017). This composition results in many caregiving and financial demands placed upon those in the workforce. Chen and Crown (2019) found social work faculty are among the lowest paid, compared with other disciplines, with significant gender wage disparities existing within the academy. The average compensation for a master's level social worker teaching an undergraduate and graduate social work course is $3,668 and $4,078 per course, respectively, with more than 9,600 faculty employed part-time in 2019-2020 (CSWE, 2021). Given the levels of compensation, many social workers cannot afford to teach in social work programs until later in their careers. With 88% of accredited social work programs reporting use of part-time faculty to teach (CSWE, 2021), a significant demand exists for social workers who want to teach, though justifying the commitment given the compensation is difficult for those who have not reached some financial stability and who are not 'settled' in their careers.

Despite the many years social workers have spent in classrooms as students, much learning may need to occur as social workers transition into roles as educators. While social workers may be responsible for case presentations or training new employees in their employment settings during mid-career, teaching in a university setting can present challenges for the later career social worker, though job satisfaction of part-time faculty is quite high overall (Nelson et al., 2020). Social workers who assume the role of adjunct faculty may need to learn new pedagogical techniques. Additionally, technological advances have made online education increasingly popular with about a third of all BSW and MSW programs online or having some online coursework (CSWE, 2021). Thus, later career social workers are often challenged as they are called to teach remotely, using their ability to foster relationships with others and engage students to make outcomes of online education comparable to face-to-face in both knowledge acquisition and satisfaction (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). However, social workers are often unfulfilled by these remote jobs as Diaconu et al. (2020) indicate the level of satisfaction of social work faculty teaching online is compromised by lack of institutional support for online instruction, technological challenges, and the enhanced time taken to monitor online students. Thus, the satisfaction of later career social workers who choose to help educate future generations of professionals given low compensation and increasing popularity of online education is uncertain.

Regulation

Social workers often possess licenses for independent practice before entering the later stages of their careers. Becoming independent practitioners is usually required in mid-

career work to advance professionally and supervise others. However, some social workers are unlicensed or licensed to practice clinically under supervision for most of their careers. Later career social workers planning for retirement may consider the possibility of opening private practices, making licensure at the independent level a necessity. Taking licensure examinations later in a social work career can be particularly stressful as research indicates pass rates are lower for older adults (Senreich & Dale, 2021) and the length of time needed to study increases given the time lapse since graduation.

Social workers who are licensed often weigh the value of maintaining their licenses once they retire and explore whether there are opportunities to place their licenses on inactive status. Inactive status often provides later career social workers the opportunity to reinstate their licenses if needed without having to meet the ongoing continuing education requirements and pay the administrative fees (NJDCA, 2022). Like mid-career social workers, later career social workers face issues of licensure portability if they decide to move due to their own retirement or the retirement of partners/spouses.

Later career social workers are also more commonly found on regulatory boards than those in early and mid-career. As appointments to licensing boards are often made by state governors or high-level officials, they can require political capital, which is more likely among those who have established reputations in their professions. Serving as regulators is a wonderful way for more experienced social workers to inform policy related to the practice of social work in their jurisdictions. Such bodies also are often involved in investigations of unlicensed practice or malfeasance by social workers. Later career social workers have the experience needed to understand the complexities often associated with these situations and understand the standard of care called into question.

Practice

While not often studied in later adulthood, research indicates resilience is a defining feature in later life as individuals have developed adaptive processes to deal with stress (Ong et al., 2009). By the time social workers enter the latter parts of their careers, they have often developed coping skills that have been used to deal with client, organizational, and service delivery stressors. The vast knowledge accumulated by those who have a lot of practical experience in the profession is extremely valuable. For experienced social workers, mentorship is a way to give back and help new and mid-career social workers maintain the passion that initially attracted them to the field. Mentorship in social work has been found to be rewarding for mentors and mentees as the former are forced to keep abreast of new trends and challenges facing the profession while the latter get questions and concerns addressed by those who have lived experiences in the profession.

Social workers with vast experience often move into paid or unpaid consultant roles, in addition to or in place of permanent employment. As consultants, social workers serve as skilled advisors and collaborators. Clinical social work consultants focus on providing staff with guidance about specialized therapeutic interventions and mental health services. Macro-level social work consultants, on the other hand, assist with tasks related to community development, policy analysis, and/or advocacy to influence positive social change. Additionally, social workers who have vast organizational experience are sought

after to assist with improving workplace dynamics, conducting program evaluations, and/or facilitating strategic planning.

In addition, or as an alternative to part-time teaching in undergraduate and graduate social work programs, later career social workers, like their mid-career counterparts, may choose to give back to the profession by being social work field instructors either in their own private practices and/or in agency settings. Later career social workers are well suited for these roles as research indicates burnout of field instructors is a real concern for the profession (McCarthy et al., 2022). Later career social workers can be better able to balance professional responsibilities with supervising students. Additionally, they have developed extensive professional networks and collegial relationships that are useful to students and early/mid-career social workers.

Additionally, social workers in later stages of their career may be questioning what is next in their personal and professional lives as they have often reached their career goals. Generativity or the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation of social workers is often prioritized (Doerwald et al., 2021). Social workers may be engaged in succession planning within their agencies to ensure there are smooth transitions for clients and coworkers as they reduce their responsibilities or work hours, as well as begin the process of retirement. This process mirrors that which social workers do with their clients as they prepare for termination of services. Termination is seen as a crucial and inevitable part of social work practice and similarly, activities in this career stage should be deliberate and planned to ensure an orderly transition to retirement. While social workers understand the importance of work-life balance, many may have difficulty retiring as the need for their services persists. Often, organizational or other factors help social workers move toward retirement. For example, Ashcroft et al. (2022) found the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in retirement of social workers earlier than planned as agencies were shut down and client services ceased. The passion that fuels social workers throughout their professional journey often remains or even intensifies over the years, so later career social workers may have difficulty leaving clients and service settings that have been the focus of their careers.

Recommendations

Social work career progression can best be understood using a developmental perspective. Each stage, early, middle, and later, is characterized by new demands and challenges, as well as shifting roles. It is helpful for those entering the profession to not only learn about the educational, regulatory, and practice issues facing them as new practitioners but also to anticipate what lies ahead in their career progression trajectory. While not all social workers have the same professional experiences, they often share milestones. The identification of these commonalities is helpful to assist social workers individually navigate workplace demands but can also be used to identify mezzo and macro supports to assist social workers at all stages of career advancement.

Education

Social workers can meet the demands of their career progression by continuing their

education both informally and formally, seeking professional instruction from continuing education courses, and engaging with peers and colleagues. Continuing education course providers should explore options to virtualize courses so as to promote and expand access to professionals. Academic institutions should prepare students for the world of work and offer curricula related to the exigencies of private practice like recordkeeping and professional liability, as well as mezzo and macro position requirements such as leadership and project management exercises. Extending ongoing access to career centers and libraries for alumni may also support the continuing education of social workers.

Regulation

License portability would ease the strain placed on social workers and clients due to greater mobility and the expansion of telehealth. The ability of state legislators to recognize social work licenses issued by partnering jurisdictions is a challenge but mirrors the commitment made by other professional groups so there is precedent to do so. Changes to public policy can also assist social workers as they move through their career stages. Expanded access to loan forgiveness occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (US Department of Education, 2022). Memorializing this expansion of eligibility requirements, as well as streamlining program application processes, would improve efficiency and satisfaction of loan forgiveness programs for social workers.

Practice

Given the importance of supervision, social workers should seek out appropriate supervisors according to licensure and certification requirements. Because burnout and compassion fatigue are of particular concern, social workers need to employ effective work-life balance practices and engage in self-care regularly to supplement their coping and resiliency skills. Just as social workers advocate for clients, they should also honor their own needs by advocating for adequate workplace support and compensation to meet personal and professional demands.

While personal attributes and ambition can impact the trajectory of social workers' careers, support from employers, supervisors, and academic institutions can ease transitions. Clear role expectations and protocols, robust induction, and onboarding, as well as promoting licensure, can help employers remove barriers for social workers and improve workplace satisfaction and retention. Employers can promote licensure by covering exam preparation in supervision and helping with licensure costs.

Conclusion

Social workers dedicate their careers to addressing both individual and systemic hardships. Promoting human well-being and empowering others are pivotal to the mission of the profession. Similar to clients and constituents, social workers are human beings with unique needs and experiences. Social workers must act as agents of change to improve professional supports for themselves. Applying a theoretical perspective used to understand the behavior of others to the career trajectory of social workers has value but is

uncommon. The developmental stages of a social work career - early, middle, and late - have distinct characteristics and require developmentally-appropriate resources and training to prepare social workers for entering the next stage with ease. If pivotal milestones in each stage are not achieved, social workers will have a more difficult time navigating the field, putting them at risk of malpractice and loss of professional opportunities and subsequent growth.

Social workers, in the early stage, cultivate a foundation for a professional identity as they enter the field, navigating complex regulations, learning best practices, and often shadowing more experienced colleagues. Employment and supervisory supports serve to assist during the early stage as social workers gain confidence and identify gaps in their knowledge base. After exploring and narrowing their career interests while seeking guidance from others, social workers enter the middle stage of their career, honing their skills and assuming additional responsibilities as they move into new roles aligned with their experience level and refined skillset. Navigating the middle stage of a social work career requires access to new educational opportunities and skill in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. As social workers gain more experience, their knowledge base grows, with some becoming experts in their areas of practice. In the later stage of their careers, social workers may take a step back from direct practice and policy work to focus on mentoring and teaching a new generation of social workers.

Promoting and enabling professional growth of social workers is vital as there is a significant need for social work services, especially given the mental health and other challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work is a profession that has always utilized a person-in-environment perspective to understanding human behavior. Using a developmentalist approach to examine professional growth of social workers assists with identifying normative professional milestones. Better understanding social workers' career trajectories can be helpful to supervisors and mentors, as well as professional organizations that aim to support social workers throughout their careers.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Dawn Apgar, Department of Social Work, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ, 07079. Email: dawn.apgar@shu.edu