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**Professional relationships: Bifurcations, threshold concepts, and MSW student voices.**

by

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**Dissertation**

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work  
Wilfrid Laurier University

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*Unless someone like you cares a whole awful  
lot,  
Nothing is going to get better.  
It's not.  
-Dr. Seuss, The Lorax*

**Professional relationships: Bifurcations, threshold concepts, and MSW student voices.****Abstract**

This qualitative study explored MSW student perceptions of the concept of professional relationships. The research question was: “What does the concept of professional relationships mean to MSW students?” The study was epistemologically rooted in social constructionism and Foucauldian theories, which inform how meaning is created and the notion of “professionalism” is deconstructed, while two-person psychologies were utilized to conceptualize the worker/client relationship to which I refer. Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory modality, 15 participants were recruited from the student body at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener, ON. Through the analysis of individual interview data, two overarching categories emerged: (a) the expression of an uncomfortable sense of “not knowing” what a beginning practitioner needs to know about professional relationships; and, (b) the inability to articulate an integrated conceptualization of the professional relationship in social work. The concept was, however, consistently bifurcated in a way that isolated being “professional” from the relational elements of the social work encounter. A third category focused on how relationships with professors, field supervisors and other social workers contributed (or failed to contribute) to the participants' learning regarding the professional relationship. This study contributes information for viewing the concept of professional relationships through threshold and performative theories, which may facilitate a shift in educational practices of graduate level social workers.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics state that social work denotes the “blend of some particular values, knowledge and skills, including the use of *relationship* as the basis of all interventions and respect for the client’s choice and involvement” (CASW, 2005, emphasis added). While addressing the centrality of relationships, Ramsay (2003) notes, “Social work claims to be relationship centered, with its domain focus on interactions and a strong allegiance to co-empowerment attributes of the professional-client relationship, but it is weak in having a clearly demonstrated model to implement this claim” (p. 334). Ramsay’s statement raises a number of questions: Is there indeed one single model of relationship? Are there not implicit tensions when trying to transform something technical (i.e., forming a model and demonstrating that model’s effectiveness) into something relational? How is this relationship taught and understood within the academy? How does that learning translate into practice while being implemented in the field? I concur with scholars such as Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Höjer (2010), Howe (1998), and Munro (2004), who point out that there are impediments in implementing a relationally-centered approach. These barriers include the effects of bureaucratization, new managerialism, and crises created in the field as a result of fiscal shortcomings and restrictive technically based practices.

The centrality of relationships in social work has been studied over the past 60 years, with a primarily therapeutic emphasis. While the focus of these studies has remained varied, some general observations can be made: A lack of relational emphasis can result in either no improvement or further deterioration of client problems (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967); techniques must be intrinsically connected to the relational context between the practitioner and the client in order to be useful (Goldfried & Davila, 2005, McWilliams, 2004; Messer & Warren, 1995); the

professional relationship can prevent premature client withdrawal from treatment (Horvath, 2000), and the professional relationship is a powerful source of change (Lambert, 2004; Norcross, 2002; Wampold, 2001). Despite this rich body of research, the converging developments of neoliberalism, bureaucratization and managerialism are shifting social work's focus away from the nature of the professional relationship (Bradley et al., 2010; Munro, 2004).

Much of my doctoral work has focused on exploring the way we conceptualize relationships with clients, with a keen interest in the role of the practitioner. There is a cacophony of voices in the literature focusing on the various aspects of this relationship between client and social worker: (a) Use of Self (Baldwin, 2013; Dewane, 2006; Mandell, 2008; Raines, 1996), (b) reflection, critical reflection, reflexivity and critical reflexivity (Bacal, 1990; Brookfield, 2009; D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2006; Dewane, 2006; Edwards & Bess, 1998; Fook & Askeland, 2007; Ganzer, 2007; Heron 2005; Kondrat, 1999; Mandell, 2008; Reupert, 2007), (c) intersubjectivity (Auerbach & Blatt, 2001; Benjamin, 1988; Ogden, 1997; Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987), (d) relational theory (Mills, 2005; Ruch, 2009; Tosone, 2004), (e) relational-model theorizing and cultural relational theory (Bergman, 1991; Jordan, 1991, 2004; Miller, 1986, 1988), (f) recognition theory (Honneth, 1995; Rossiter, 2005; Turney, 2012; Thompson, 2006; Webb, 2010;), and (g) social constructivism (Davis & Roberts, 1985; Harper & Spellman, 2006; Houston, 2001; McNamee & Gergen, 1992).

In addition to social work, numerous disciplines have attempted to articulate the relationship between client and professional including medicine, psychology/psychoanalysis, sociology and philosophy. Each field focuses differently on relationships, making a singular cohesive understanding of professional relationships difficult to articulate. Some articulations focus on the client perspective, such as transference within psychoanalysis and social work

practice (Gabbard, 2001; Hanna, 1993; Hayes et al., 2011;), or patient improvement in medicine/nursing (Fawcett, 2010; Senn, 2013).

In my view, these voices are theoretical attempts to realize relational theories in practice and to articulate the relationship between the practitioner and the client. Despite the abundance of literature, there is a lacuna in the field of social work regarding the definition and conceptualization of professional relationships. This is perhaps due to the lack of a demonstrated model as Ramsay (2003) suggests; however, I believe the gap I have identified is more encompassing and extensive than a demonstrated model. The learning and implementation of professional relationships within social work education is not clearly articulated. I was interested in exploring how students learn and utilize the theoretical ideas of relationship, which proved troublesome as the findings will explore.

To compound the lacuna in the field, the professionalization of social work has led to the structuring of social work curriculum, which constructs students as particular types of subjects. Moreover, this construction enables students to adopt a professional identity and construct their clients as disadvantaged, at risk, mentally ill, marginalized and so on. These subjectivities have a direct connection with the discourses students learn about and are influenced by the practices that they engage in and also resist. I am interested to explore students' understanding of professionalism within social work while considering the worker/client relationship. What are the implications for power? What language do students use to describe themselves, their clients and their work? Do they note any tensions between being a professional and also being relationally orientated? These questions informed my current study as I explored how professional relationships are understood by MSW students.

### **Situating Myself**

I believe it is necessary to consider why this topic is important and interesting for me to study. As a social worker in the field, I relied on my capacity to build relationships with clients as the foundation to my practice. This led to positive outcomes for clients while aligning to my own beliefs about what helps someone with change, namely connection. As an example, a client once told me that she trusted me to help her family reunite after I had apprehended her child. Another example occurred when a counselling client once thanked me for not judging her. It was through the relationship that trust and being non-judgmental were key ingredients to the intervention.

While employed in the field, I would supervise bachelor and master level social work students. They struggled with wanting to know *what to do*. They focused on technique and wanted strategies they could apply to clients based on their problems. This struggle also appeared with my students once I moved into the classroom as a social work educator. Students would ask “What do I do when someone does *x*?”, “What do you say when a client...?” or “Can I use this CBT manual with all my anxious clients?”. These questions highlight how students expect their education, particularly their graduate education, to give them rote practices to make them “good” social workers once they enter the field.

Often, my response is to say, “Well, it depends”. My response is often met with either frustrated sighs or the occasional eye roll. I have experienced, anecdotally, that students are frustrated when asked to think about the professional relationship, or how their biases and assumptions can influence their professional judgement and the theories they align with. Despite the knowledge that technical skills are applied through the professional relationship, students struggled to articulate the value of the professional relationship. This was curious to me as a new

social work educator. When I went to the literature for some guidance as to how to teach about professional relationships, I came up empty handed. There was an abundance of literature that spoke to the importance of the professional relationship or how to characterize it; however, there was nothing which directly explored whether MSW students understand the concept or how to better teach it.

### **The Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings MSW students ascribe to the professional relationship, and revealed that meaning making is troublesome when it comes to professional relationships. Social work has started to utilize the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990) to inform andragogical approaches to education (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone, 2011; McKinney, 2012). This has allowed social work educators to explore improvements that can be made through evidence and “engaged critique” (Grise-Owens, Owens & Miller, 2016, p. 6) of their current practices. I believe we need to consider how we teach concepts like professional relationships considering the absence within the literature, my own anecdotal experiences, and the findings of this study.

It was challenging for students to consider the concept without breaking it into two parts: professionalism and relationships. This idea will be explored in detail through the findings and discussion chapters. Since professional relationships are central to social work practice, this study will also contribute towards the reevaluation of relational practice within the field. Moreover, situating the research within the educational context will also furnish useful information to social work educators around how they teach concepts like professional relationships.

### **An Overview of Subsequent Chapters**

In this chapter, I have introduced the dissertation study by providing the context of professional relationships within the academy and the field. In chapter two, I review the literature regarding professional relationships including historical contributions from social work, psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, nursing, medicine and social constructionism. I introduce this study's primary research question and explain the theoretical underpinnings that guided my approach to this study. In chapter three, I explain the methodology of constructivist grounded theory and explain the research process in depth.

Chapter four explores the key findings that emerged from the dialogues with research participants. The two overarching categories emerging from the findings were: (a) the expression of an uncomfortable sense of "not knowing" what a beginning practitioner needs to know about professional relationships; and, (b) the inability to articulate an integrated conceptualization of the professional relationship in social work. The paradox involved in the perceptions of "not knowing" is that participants did, in fact, demonstrate some understanding of various aspects of professional relationships. The concept was, however, consistently bifurcated in a way that isolated being "professional" from the relational elements of the social work encounter. A third category focused on how relationships with professors, field supervisors and other social workers contributed (or failed to contribute) to the participants' learning regarding the professional relationships.

Chapter five presents a discussion of theory grounded within the findings and situates the concept of professional relationships as a threshold concept (Myer & Land, 2006).

Considerations for the performance of professionalism are also discussed. The thesis concludes

with the study's implications for social work educators and suggestions for future research pertaining to professional relationships.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review & Theoretical Underpinnings**

The topic of literature reviews for grounded theory has been disputed and misunderstood throughout the history of the methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978) advocated for a delayed literature review until after completing the analysis, which has been contested since researchers do not begin a study without some background leading their thinking and study designs (see Bulmer, 1979; Dey, 1999; Layder, 1998). The strategy utilized for this literature review attempts to bridge both these perspectives. The literature explored is meant to provide a snapshot of the current conversation (Silverman, 2000) located within the topics of the findings. I relied on the theoretical areas discussed by the participants to provide the basis of this literature review. Moreover, I have also included the major theories that informed my own thinking about professional relationships prior to data collection.

The concept of relationship, which is embedded not only in social work values, is also a central organizing factor in the definition of social work. In addition, the concept of “professional relationship” for social work often includes an analysis of power and the need to deconstruct the notion of “professional,” which remains a primary area of concern for this study. This literature calls for an urgent need to revalue relationships in consideration of neo-liberalism, bureaucratization and managerialism; however, a gap is apparent in the contribution of the educational context where learning about relational practices occur and the theories used by students to frame their understanding of the professional relationship. Against this backdrop, I will now elaborate on these areas further.

### **Social Work: A Historically Divided Field**

Historically, social work evolved on two interconnected fronts: a focus of change on the individual level; and a focus of change at the community and societal level. These fronts

coincide with the social casework movement and the Settlement House movement, respectively. Mary Richmond, known as the mother of the casework movement focused her work on the improvement and betterment of the family and the individual. Richmond recognized the need for social reform and believed society could be reformed through improving the individual person, one at a time (Richmond, 1917). Alternately, the Settlement House movement, founded by Jane Addams, emphasized social change from a community action paradigm (McLaughlin, 2002). These two approaches to social work have been reflected in emergent schools of social work, while some schools have attempted to incorporate a philosophy situating problems at both the individual and social level (Dore, 1999).

As social work evolved, the belief that problems could be categorized and assessed led to the emergence of diagnostic schools, which later became the psychosocial school. The diagnostic perspective was based on three defining characteristics: (1) an emphasis on ecological/systems theory; (2) differential treatment based on assessment and diagnosis, and; (3) a treatment component “based on a blend of processes directed as diagnostically indicated toward modification in the person or his social or interpersonal environment or both and of the exchanges between them” (Hollis, 1969, p. 36-37). Here the added system perspective within the study-diagnose-treat paradigm becomes rather evident. Continued debate has resulted in the emergence of the “functional” school of casework. Smalley (1969) argues analogously that this school incorporated humanistic approaches, emphasized the *process* of helping as a reaction against the psychology of illness. Additionally, critical social work has emerged to add the element of postmodern analysis of power to the narrative (Heron, 2005; Mullaly, 2002, Rossiter, 2005).

A crisis in social work has been echoed over the decades. As argued by Germain (1969), we lacked identity, were consumed with infighting over the view of problems and interventions, all interconnected by “professional insecurity” (p. 6). This is evident today as the debates continue over the role of social work, whether individual change or social change is emphasized, and whether change is attributed to the relationship with a social worker or the technique they use. By 1995, this argument was reignited by Specht and Courtney (1994) who argued, “social work has abandoned its mission to help the poor and oppressed and to build communality. Instead, many social workers are devoting their energies and talents to careers in psychotherapy” (p. 4). The void between social reform and clinical work, as outlined by Specht and Courtney, has been challenged by numerous authors who claim that a merger of the two positions is possible (see Fischer, 1979, Haynes, 1998, Sachs & Newdon, 1999, Wakefield, 1988). Wakefield (1988) extended this merger by suggesting a distributed justice model as an organizing value. These competing ideas make it difficult to ascertain what it is that a social worker is meant to do.

It is noteworthy that while tracing these historical developments, the authors describe the notion of a relationship as central to social work and focuses on both the individual and the community/social parlance. Relationships continue to be an organizing principle that underpins the practice of social work regardless of whether the relationship is between an individual and the social worker, or the social worker with a community/society. In the current practice environment, there is a struggle with bureaucratized and managerialized practices, which overshadow the relationship to ensure standardization and competency. Therefore, this study underpins the need for the professional relationship to be revalued amongst social workers.

### **Situating Current Social Work Practice: Neo-Liberalism**

The neo-liberal environment, in which current social work educational and professional practices are embedded, needs to be considered in relation to this study. A brief overview of neoliberalism will support my argument. Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework to such practices (p. 2).

The macro-economic idea underpinning neoliberalism is to reduce the size and influence of the state while promoting private enterprise, with the belief that reduced involvement of the state will result in diminished responsibility of the state, thereby decreasing taxation rates, which catalyzes economic growth. The belief that economic benefits would filter down to the poor and reduce inequality, while idealistic, has not been demonstrated (Spolander et al., 2014). In fact, there appear to be growing levels of inequality in many countries (Hills, 1995; Spolander et al., 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Neoliberalism has created certain concerns for the field of social work and the concept of professional relationships through the processes of bureaucratization, new-managerialism and evidence-based practices.

#### **Professionalization and bureaucratization.**

Professionalization is the formal organization of occupational groups who stake a claim to their own education, create full time positions, professional associations and a code of ethics. Throughout this process of organization, it becomes important for professions to maintain self-regulation and autonomy (Hall, 1969; Wilensky, 1964). Professionals have to adapt to social

changes in addition to organizational and bureaucratic realities which have turned modern professions into occupational professions (Elliott, 1972; Freidson, 1983) and organizational professions (Larson, 1977). These shifts reflect the organizational control of professions by business and market driven practices (Duyvendak, Knijn & Kremer, 2006).

Bureaucratization, as a separate process, situates professions within organizational structures and regulatory bodies. Unfortunately for social work, professional regulations have assumed a business orientation (Harris, 1998), which has caused the field to struggle with audits in an attempt to understand service delivery within a neo-liberal context demanding of such audits. The bureaucratization of social work practice is not merely discussed theoretically in the literature, but is also practically experienced by front line workers in various areas of the field. Multi-hierarchical layers of organization seem to distort process, communication, front-line practice, and client<sup>1</sup>-worker relationship. Bureaucratization has caused social work to become a 'bureau-profession' (Munro, 2004), which means leaving decision making to a hierarchical process by taking away the element of personal autonomy from the professional domain, often placing it in the hands of non-social workers, such as lawyers, psychologists, and business professionals.

### **New managerialism.**

Managerialism is concerned with cost control, targets, indicators, quality models and market mechanisms, prices and competition, which has led to a close examination of budgets and time management (Noordegraaf, 2007). Within social work, these areas are often audited and

---

<sup>1</sup>I use the term *client* carefully here, as this was the term utilized by the participants to describe the individuals they worked with. I am aware of possible alternatives (service user, consumer, customer, or expert by experience); however for consistency throughout this paper I will use the term client. To learn more about the language used to describe service recipients see McLaughlin, 2009.

regulated from external sources. These audits have diminished the professional's autonomous power through evaluation and regulation (Harris, 1998). Therefore, "new managerialism" has perpetuated these regulatory procedures and is based in neoliberal thinking and market economics (Bradley et al., 2010; Harlow, 2004; Kolthoff et al., 2007). Hall's (1969) notion of heteronomous professions has a particular relevance to this discussion. These professions are often "subordinated to externally derived systems" (p. 94), and the profession of social work has relied heavily on regulation and funding from outside sources, namely governmental bodies. This outside regulation creates a tension within the field of social work as professional workers attempt to govern themselves and mitigate outside interferences (Noordegraaf, 2007). Government and managerial policies have developed a "performance culture" by controlling "quality, optimizing effectiveness and reducing risk in social work departments" (Webb, 2001, p. 60). These policies have led to the shift towards evidence and accountability.

Desiring heightened levels of accountability, social work organizations have moved toward formalized auditing processes where "gate keeping" and "rationing" resources have become a means of monitoring services and finances, particularly as budgets are decreasing. Increased consumption of services and reduced costs have become essential considerations in the practice of social work (Rossiter, 2005). Performance appraisals are focused on whether or not these services are provided efficiently and ensure the utilization of minimum resources with clients. Munro (2004) has argued that these audits ignore the nature of the relationship in social work practice by focusing on service outputs as opposed to user outcomes. Bradley et al. (2010) echoed this contention, noting that a focus on outcomes inevitably diminishes the importance of relational aspects of the field (p. 774).

**Evidence-based practice.**

This practice context creates pressure to find “ways to do it” (technique) with less focus on relationship and context of client issues (Rossiter, 2005, p. 194). Modeled after evidence-based medicine, evidence-based practice (EBP) has emerged as a key paradigm within neo-liberalism and bureaucratized practice that seems to focus on finding a “way to do it.” EBP therefore assumes that solutions in social work practice stem from having clearly articulated answerable questions. This formulation begs the question: What kind of knowledge is helpful for social work practice? Neo-liberalism demands measurable outcomes, premising practice on scientific methods. EBP has been hailed as the new paradigm for social work (Howard, McMillen & Pollio, 2003), and is widely supported by academics (Gambrill, 1999, 2006; Hurlburt et. al., 2014; Ruban & Parrish, 2007; Sheldon, 2001). EBP, however, has also been criticized for not fitting the “realities of individualized, contextualized practice, especially nonmedical practice, wherein problems are less well defined” (Mullen & Streiner, 2004, p. 114).

Since EBP has been hailed as the new paradigm for social work practice, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what it entails. Gibbs & Gambrill (2002) have described five steps of EBP: (1) an answerable question based from the client’s problem, (2) utilizing with “maximum efficiency” the most-effective evidence to answer this question, (3) some critical appraisal from the social worker of this evidence, (4) its application to the client, and (5) an evaluation. These answerable questions become limited to behavioural social work, medical and health care research, and positivist empirical science (Webb, 2001). Cohen (2011) wonders whether knowledge for social work is about solving problems, or is knowledge used to “engage clients in more continuous and creative process[es] of discovery?” (p. 33). This is a particularly salient question since many clients struggle to formulate the nature of their problem. It is not feasible to

include an answerable question into the research when the formulation of the problem is a problem in itself. Questioning knowledge is particularly apt since most social work problems are not isolated; instead, they are complex systems of interacting problems (Adams, Matto, & LeCroy, 2009). EBP assumes that we have an identifiable problem to lead us to a question, which we can turn to the literature for getting an answer. Reamer (1992) cautions that,

empiricism can be taken too far... While [it] can certainly inform and guide intervention, we must be sure that it does not strip intervention of its essential ingredients – a keen sense of humanity, compassion, and justice and the ability to engage and work with people... Truly enlightened practice integrates the systematic method of empiricism with the valuable knowledge that social workers have once regarded as ... practice wisdom and professional intuition (p. 258) (as cited in Goldstein, Miehl, & Ringel, 2009, p. 17).

Reamer's caution is akin to the call for the integration of relationship with technique, whereby the relationship is the means through which the technique can become useful to the clients (Goldfried & Davison, 1976; Goldfried & Davila, 2005; Krupnick et al., 1996).

EBP perpetuates the stereotype of the professional practitioner as an ascetic technician; however, as Folgheraiter (2004) argues, the social worker deep down is "also a man or a woman and unconsciously [defines] problems according to moral sentiments" (p. 31). Acting professional requires an ethical obligation to abstain from moralism; however, Folgheraiter suggests that such behaviour is not always easy and social work actions need to be humane as opposed to merely being technically correct. Folgheraiter argues that a professional relationship cannot be a one-directional bond where the solution is transferred to the client from the social worker; it is essentially a relational and two-directional process.

### **Revaluing Relational Practices**

To consider the reevaluation of relational practices, we must think about the possible beneficiaries of such a paradigm shift. While evidence based practices are important to the practice of social work, it would be far-fetched to conclude that evidence based practices are *the* new paradigm. Limiting social work practice to EBP satisfies funders, governmental bodies, and empirical researchers where answerable questions can be paired with findable solutions. At this point, it seems that social work is in desperate need of a paradigm shift.

Other fields have wrestled with the concept of professional relationships. In the psychotherapy literature, there is a renewed movement towards viewing the relationship in the context that allows the technique to become useful, promoting a client-centered approach to therapeutic practice (Goldfried & Davison, 1976; Goldfried & Davila, 2005; Krupnick et al., 1996). The separation of technique from relationship continues to perpetuate the construction of these concepts as mutually exclusive, which is a curious arrangement since the research suggests that the relationship is a central organizing principle in practice (Carkhuff, 1969; Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967; Goldstein, Miehl, & Ringle, 2009; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967).

A similar departure occurred in medicine when physicians moved away from patient-centered care, where the professional relationship was more central, towards a focus on treating the pathophysiology or the bio-chemical makeup of a patient (Shorter, 1985). This coincided with the emergence of the medical model of social work practice (Weick, 1983), a model still employed in many social work organizations today (Boyle et al., 2006) despite criticisms for being too limited, too problem focused and obscuring the relevance of external environmental factors (Ashford et al., 2006; Sayce, 2000). Meanwhile, research on how psychological, social and cultural factors augment the working alliance denote medicine's return to patient-centered

care (Fuertes et al., 2007). Roter (2000) found that the optimal model of relationships for medicine is based on mutuality. A strong patient-physician relationship can improve the medical management of the patient and address the patients' concerns in a meaningful, trusting manner. In addition, the relationship can be responsive to patient's emotional ambivalence and increases the informative/educational role provided by physicians. A strong relationship also facilitates joint participation between patients and physicians, which results in an egalitarian and collaborative professional approach. Despite these findings, medicine continues to struggle with how to establish a professional relationship (Rosser & Kasperski, 2001).

Similar to medicine, social work literature is exploring the integration of EBP while considering the centrality of relationship in practice. Howe (1998), for example, argued for a relationship-based practice within social work and notes that relational skills must be taught to social workers, much like how music is taught to a musician (p. 46). Trevithick (2003) analogously repeats Howe's call for social workers to have a theoretical understanding of relationship and develop the ability to implement that understanding in practice. Ruch (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) has proposed a relationship-based model of reflection to incorporate the issues of power and oppressive practice, while echoing others who have revalued psychodynamic-informed social work practice (see Borden, 2000; Sudbery, 2010). Although these are worthwhile places to begin the revaluation of a relationship, the tensions of technical and highly bureaucratized practices continue to threaten relational concepts.

Howe (1998) and Trevithick (2003) have suggested that social workers need to be taught about relational practices and theories in order to enhance their capacities for engaging with their clients. However, it remains to be seen whether the students already believe they are learning about relationships, and if so, what theories do they use to inform their understanding? In

addition, is the perceived learning reflected in their understanding of how to embody that learning in practice? The microskills and common factor literature point to various skills regarding a therapeutic relationship and include: empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967), attending behaviour, listening skills, skills of self-expression, interpretation (Ivey, 1971), having a warm and positive regard, facilitating hope, and providing empathic understandings (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). These “skills” also rest on inherent assumptions about the nature of problems being constructed, how we come to know ourselves through a contact with another perspective and our development through relational processes.

### **Deconstructing the Professional Relationship**

It is important to deconstruct the term “professional relationship” for this dissertation. In using this term, I initially intended to refer to the relationship between the social worker and their client. Upon reflection on the major theoretical bodies noted earlier, this term is seen to be troublesome within current theoretical contexts. Traditionally, professionalization was restricted to “inferential occupations”, where professionals “treat individual clients, make specific decisions, analyze specific cases or give specific advice on the basis of learned abstract insights or theories” (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 766). Moreover, Noordegraaf (2007) described that professionals “know how to act, speak and dress; they know how to act as professional, even when they do not treat cases” (p. 766). A social worker, for example, does not merely treat clients, but also acts as a social worker. This performative aspect of acting professional is particularly relevant to the current study, which will be explored further in the discussion.

Discussions about professionalism have become more critical since Wilensky’s (1964) initial descriptions. The critical argument suggests that social workers are positioned in a non-

relational and asymmetrical manner by their “professional” status, a status social work achieved through the pursuit of collective associations and unions, enhancing training and recognition, and increasing salaries (Philpott, 1990). Critical social workers problematize the notion of “professionalism” by pointing towards the various dangers associated with the misuse and abuse of power (Brookfield, 2009; Fook, 1999; Xu, 2010), social injustice (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Heron, 2005), and structural inequalities (Ife, 1999). Within the current neo-liberal and bureaucratized practice context the dominant discourse continues to position us as professionals; however, this discourse constructs professionalism without including an emphasis on relationship. Significant tensions arise when the concept of professional and relationship are taken together.

The second part of the term, relationship, is embedded in theories and philosophies that are varied, reflecting their own version of a client-worker relationship. The psychoanalytic literature contains ideas like attachment (Erickson, 1950; Kohlberg, 1969), subject and object (Borden, 2009; Mitchell & Black, 1995; Winnicott, 1958), counter/transference (Hanna, 1993; Hayes et al., 2011), and intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 1990; Frie & Reis, 2005; Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987). Relational-cultural theories are built upon the concepts of connection and disconnection as a developmental task which are then recreated within the helping relationship (Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1988; Walker, 2004). The psychological relational paradigm suggests particular ontological, epistemological and developmental aspects for something to be considered relational (Spezzano, 1996). Additionally, post-modern approaches are concerned with power embedded within relationships (Foucault, 1997; Moffatt & Miehl, 1999), while social constructionism has become a theoretical underpinning for practice (Epston, White & Murray, 1992; Morgan, 2000).

It is difficult to establish a framework for what has been referred to as a “relational paradigm,” since relational theories come from separate disciplines with varying perspectives. The term relational paradigm has been used as a way of differentiating relational theories from the concept of the professional relationship, which I will now explore further.

### **Contributions From Relational Psychology**

Relational theories are generally thought to be an umbrella term (Aron, 1996a; Cait, 2008), and have been described as the third wave of psychoanalysis within the United States (Spencer, 2000). They are hailed as an eclectic set of ideas anchored in the notion that “internal or external, real or imagined” relationships are central to understanding humanity, both socially and individually (Aron, 1996b, p. 18). Within this category of relational theory, there are writings regarding feminism and psychoanalysis (Miller, 1976), interpersonal theory (Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953), object relations (Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1948; Winnicott, 1960), self psychology (Kohut, 1977), intersubjectivity (Stolorow, Brandshaft, & Atwood 1987), and developmental theories (Stern, 1985; Tronick, 1989; Trevarthen, 1979).

Freud (1913/1966) noted that three components were necessary when exploring the impact of the relations between an analyst and a patient: transference, countertransference, and (subsequently named) alliance. The concepts of transference/countertransference have been elaborated upon since Freud expanded his theory to include the conviction that the therapist’s subjectivity is “involved in the way the patient’s behavior is experienced” (Gabbard, 2001, p. 984). Some theorists, using this inclusion, adopt the relational perspective of countertransference. This began when Heimann (1950) observed that analysis was indeed a relationship between two people. Some authors suggest that countertransference can be useful in understanding a patient (Bernard, 2005; Gabbard, 2001; Rosenberg, 2006), which has fostered a

move to the relational perspective of countertransference. This view notes that there is a mutually constructed transference/countertransference between the patient and therapist, and it is a jointly created phenomenon.

Emphasizing the developmental nature of psychopathology as rooted in the evolution of the mother-infant relationship; object relations theory began to formulate a relational context for struggles in adulthood (Borden, 2009; Fairbairn, 1952; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Klein, 1948, Mitchell & Black, 1995; Taylor, 2009; Winnicott, 1958). The object relations model contributed to the development of relational theories by first acknowledging the relational nature of the mother-infant bond. The notion of the maternal/child relationship as a key to development was paralleled in the relationship between patient and analyst (Mitchell & Black, 1995), a concept that echoes Fairbairn's notion that therapeutic relationship offers another object relationship for the patient. These ideas are central to the psychoanalytic idea that patients develop and grow through the relationship with their therapist.

Self psychology (Kohut, 1959; Wolf, 1988), a related theory, began to branch away from Freudian drive theories to incorporate external social concerns, the interplay between intrapsychic and interpersonal worlds as well as the concept of the selfobject. Self psychology theorized a relationally focused practice, which was highly influential to the conceptualization of relational theories as psychoanalysis continued to develop.

Another theory, Intersubjectivity, has its roots in the philosophical thinking of Habermas (1970) and was brought into the psychological arena by Benjamin (1988) and Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987). Described as the bridge between object relations and self psychology (Wolf, 1988), intersubjectivity is an important concept to consider within the development of relational ideas as it breaks away from the selfobject idea of Self Psychology by

suggesting that the “Other” used to see our Self is subjective in nature. Situating both individuals within a professional relationship as subjects helps move us towards a relational paradigm where we can view the intersubjective process together, rather than seeing the work of the professional being discharged to a client “other”.

Broadly speaking, relational theorists have drifted away from Freudian notions of the individual drive theory and ego psychology to a more relationally oriented framework. Indeed, this was a paradigm shift worthy of Kuhn (1962), as these new theories questioned the dominant paradigm of their day (Freud), and moved towards a relational understanding where the purpose of an individual is to forge relationships. This shift marked a departure from the individuation of classical psychotherapy. Interestingly, Philipson (1993) observed that this shift coincided with more women being introduced into the field of psychotherapy. Social work’s history with psychotherapy is important to this discussion and remains a relevant consideration for Canadian social work practice. In Ontario, 54% of social workers report their primary function is to provide clinical practice, counselling or psychotherapy (OCSWSSW, 2015). This aligns with the American statement that social work became the majority group of professionals who provide psychotherapeutic treatment in North America (NASW, n.d.). The values and centrality of relationships historically favoured with social workers contributes to this paradigm shift.

The inclusion of relational psychodynamic viewpoints have become marginalized in social work curriculum (Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005) as the field has focused on evidence-based practices and the management of resources. Further, in Canada, structural social work dominates the national academic context (Hick, 2006; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007; Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010), which leaves the intrapsychic dynamics of structural issues as an epiphenomenon, rather than seeing how the intrapsychic and the structural are related. Relational social workers argue

that the structural and the intrapsychic are deeply connected, and if we are to resolve problems in the real world, we need an understanding of the individual and the social aspects which contribute to the perpetuation of client problems (Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010; Saari, 2005). Social workers who value the psychodynamic approach have become marginalized as psychodynamic ideas are critiqued as being “outdated, pathologizing, unscientific, sexist, culturally irrelevant, lacking in evidence-based support, and ill-suited to the reality of social work practice” (Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010, p. 210). These critiques do not take into account the more recent emergence of a relational, two-person psychological paradigm and rely on outdated stereotypes of Freudian thinking. Moreover, the history of the psychodynamic theories as being emancipatory, critiquing both the social and the political, have been lost to favour a more conservative perspective of Freud’s initial theory (Danto, 2009; Epple, 2007; Kovel, 1988).

The external world has been understood as something “out there” which can be explored through objective measures, whereas the internal world exists “in here” which is often explored through more subjective means (Saari, 2005). Relational social workers understand that it is through interaction with human others that we are able to create an image of ourselves, and a world which is co-created through relationships with significant others. As social workers work with the vulnerable and the oppressed while keeping a focus on issues of diversity and social justice, we need a model which responds to the wholistic needs of a person (both the structural, the social and the intrapsychic); the relational model responds to this need (Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005).

One benefit to utilizing a relational model which encapsulates the intrapsychic and the contextual environment, is that a clients’ psychological and social needs can be met with “comprehensive recommendations rather than partial solutions and disjointed interventions”

(Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010, p. 220). The relational psychodynamic concepts have been described as providing a “conceptual linkage” between the individual and their broader contextual environment; however, this requires that social workers consider the individual and their context at the same time (Altman, 2010).

Building on these ideas while considering the strong historical influence of psychoanalytic ideas within the parlance of social work practice, a discussion of a relational paradigm for social work needs to include the ‘use of self’.

### **The Use of Self**

The use of self is a central concept within social work practice and has been described as a distinguishing factor that separates social work from other professions (Dewane, 2006). The use of self and the notion of self are historically and culturally specific concepts rooted in distinct philosophical and disciplinary orientations. ‘The self’ means different things to different people: Although the notions of self and other are deeply ingrained in Western philosophical schools of thought (e.g., Hegel, 1967; Sartre, 1956), Freud’s insights into the influence of the self in therapy formed the basis for the psychoanalytic concept of countertransference, which, in turn, laid the foundation for understanding the use of self (Bernard, 2005). Even in psychoanalysis, theorizing has moved beyond countertransference into the areas of co-transference and co-construction of reality, thereby articulating the intimate relationality and intersubjectivity of self and other (Benjamin, 1998; Wang, 2012).

With the growing influence of postmodern analyses of power, (Chambon, Irving & Epstein, 1999) anti-discriminatory (Thompson, 2006) and anti-oppressive approaches to critical social work practice (Mullaly, 2002), social workers have come under heightened pressure to critically reflect on their social locations to minimize the potential harm they could inflict upon

clients through their relationship with them. The liberal humanist notion of self is being increasingly contested and replaced with notions of subjectivities and positionalities (Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2005). The postmodern shift aligns with the emergence of a two-person relational paradigm, and, while there may be disagreement on the nature of the self, there is at least a common acknowledgement that we are products of our relationships, environment, and constructions.

Dewane (2006) suggests different categories for the use of self: use of personality, use of belief system, *relational dynamics* (my emphasis), anxiety and self-disclosure. Mandell (2007) describes how traditional practice wisdom utilizes self-awareness, self-monitoring, and reflection as methods of “doing” use of self (p. 8). Ultimately, when considering the use of self, we are concerned with how the person impacts the process and outcome of professional work (Baldwin, 2013).

Despite its crucial uniqueness, use of self is disappearing from curriculum at an alarming rate (Adamowich et al, 2014). Virginia Satir (Baldwin & Satir, 1987) suggested practitioners become “magicians” by melding the professional self of what one knows (training, knowledge, techniques) with the personal self of who one actually is (personality traits, belief systems, and life experience). This melding process nicely captures the essence of what we set out to accomplish when we use our selves in practice.

The question remains: Why do we need to consider our self within our practice? I argue that it is the beginning place of recognizing the social worker’s involvement within the professional relationship. The use of self has been critiqued (Mandell, 2007) as social work has moved towards critical practice. Mandell argues for an expanded or revised understanding of the use of self to include conversations about power and anti-oppression; however, once these

elements are considered we move away from the traditional use of self towards reflexivity or critical reflection.

### **Reflexivity and Critical Reflection**

One challenge for reviewing the literature is the use of language: reflectivity, reflexivity, critical reflectivity, critical reflexivity, are all discussed in various overlapping capacities without a clear distinction between them (see Dewane, 2006; Edwards & Bees, 1998; Basescu, 1990; Heron 2005; Ganzer, 2007; Kondrat, 1999; Fook & Askeland, 2007; Brookfield, 2009; Mandell, 2008; D’Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2006; Reupert, 2007). I find most authors use various terms, without clarifying why they have chosen *that* particular term (reflectivity, reflexivity critical reflexivity etc.). Kondrat (1999) presents a formulation which expands on each of these terms. She offers three levels of awareness as identified in the literature: simple conscious awareness, reflective self-awareness, and reflexive self-awareness. Kondrat then extends these basic categories by suggesting a fourth type, critical reflectivity, which is most relevant to this discussion.

Critical reflectivity, according to Kondrat (1999) requires an understanding of the self, which considers not only the personal world of experience, but also the larger social world. In this framing, there is “the world” and there is “my world.” Critical reflectivity explores the “correspondences and contradictions” between these two “worlds” (Kondrat, 1999, p. 465). Critical reflectivity brings in a macro understanding of the self, which places emphasis on understanding not only our self, but also our self’s relation to broader context. With this connection established, we can begin to ask how social structures are related to human awareness.

Kondrat (1999) challenges us to consider economic, social, and educational systems, and interrogate whether or not we internalize and accept their structures. In what ways do our intentions contradict the outcomes of our activities? “The goal of this sort of reflecting would be for each worker to identify and correct negative feelings, attitudes, or perceptions related to people who belong to particular social categories” (p. 467), states Kondrat. The challenge for the social worker, then, is to “think objectively about patterns of behavior, affect, perception, and behavior, identifying any such patterns that may reflect bias or discrimination” (p. 467). It is not enough to only identify such assumptions, but to begin to think about their influence. Ultimately, we must understand how our stories cross with the stories of those with whom we work. We need to remember that this type of reflection is still geared towards better understanding of our clients and, ideally, creating a space for change. Fook (1999) notes this kind of reflective “approach questions positivist assumptions of a traditional approach. Reflective approaches also emphasize the intuition and artistry involved in professional practice, and the importance of context and interpretation in influencing action” (p. 201).

As a foundation to my discussion of how the notion of relationship has developed, it is safe to say that relational ideas have changed over time, have moved from objective to subjective forms of understanding, and have begun to incorporate the concept of power.

### **Microskills/Common Factors**

As mentioned earlier, the microskill and common factor literature point towards various terms regarding the therapeutic relationship: empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967), attending behaviour, listening skills, skills of self-expression, interpretation (Ivey, 1971), having a warm, positive regard, facilitating hope, and providing empathic understandings (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). The use of “skill” operationalizes

these elements, which aligns with a positivist, one-person viewpoint. If we truly are working from a relational paradigm, should we not pause to ask why these “skills” are central? Do they not promote a relationship with our clients? How do we go about developing them?

Biestek (1957) notes that relationship is the channel for the entire casework process: “[T]hrough it flow the mobilization of the capacities of the individual and the mobilization of community resources; through it also flow the skills in interviewing, study, diagnosis and treatment” (p. 4). The concern remains that skills, also referred to as microskills and common factors, are not clearly described in terms of their own development.

### **Relational Cultural Theory**

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is a welcomed addition to this discussion around relatedness that shares and adds some foundational ideas including mutuality and shared power, empathy, and therapeutic authenticity. In addition to drawing in a feminist voice to my discussion, Relational Cultural theory provides a framework which considers race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, class, and health status (Walker, 2004). This body of literature will also help clarify the broader components of relationship even as it flows out of the concepts of relatedness, use of self, reflexivity, microskills and common factors.

Relational Cultural theory explores the idea of empathy and relationship leading to a practice which focuses on the “integration of self-other experience in which the validity of one’s own experience as well as the other’s gets acknowledged” (Jordan, 1991, p. 00). Jordan’s model includes the notion of empathic attunement, which echoes Self Psychology and the language of common factors/microskills.

Relational Cultural Theory began as a theory of women’s development that emphasized the centrality and continuity of relationship and connection in women’s lives. Making connection

a central component of development challenges hegemonic Western psychological, social, and economic systems (Jordan, 2004). In addition, the role of culture alongside connection breaks the historical silence about connection by exposing the fact that traditional one-person theories valorize separation and autonomy. The framework was developed in response to theories of human growth where men and boys were prioritized. For example, Erickson's (1950) or Kohlberg's (1969) stages of development were based on values of independence and autonomy rather than interdependence, connectedness and care for others. Relational Cultural Theory advocates for a focus away from traditional Western psychologies toward a psychology of relational being that strives to be inclusive of all women, and attempts to address power and dominance among/between people in all settings. While initially developed to address the predicament of women's development, Relational Cultural Theory has been extended to include men, and has even been described as a paradigm shift in conceptualizing male development since traditional theories have neglected how men perceive, understand, and act in a relationship.

Connection and disconnection are at the heart of Relational Cultural Theory.

Disconnection from others is viewed as one of the primary sources of human suffering, while disconnection from one's self creates distress, inauthenticity, and ultimately a sense of isolation in the world (Jordan, 1989; Miller, 1986, 1988). This idea has been echoed in Folgheraiter's (2004) ideas that relational social work practice involves exploring the networking and social areas within a client's life. To increase those *relational* connections means utilizing personal and community networks as a support system.

### **Relationship As Process**

These noted theories have provided the roots to a relational paradigm, as I understand it; however, the exploration of relational skills has added another layer to the equation. Part of the

difficulty in understanding these relational characteristics is that they have been conceptualized as microskills (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967; Ivey, 1971) or common factors (Sprenkle, Davis, & Lebow, 2009), without being explicitly connected to foster a relationship or therapeutic alliance particularly in social work practice. This has led to the relationship being reduced to descriptions of necessary components and becoming static in its definition; however, “when viewed as a process, the therapeutic relationship represented by the interactions between therapist and client(s) can become a process through which change can be promoted rather than merely a factor in change” (Sexton, Ridley & Kliner, 2004, p. 145). This last point is particularly interesting to me as it suggests that a relationship is a process, which indicates there is a development between the social worker and the client.

It is not surprising that the professional relationship is not easily defined when the characteristics that constitute a relationship are varied across theoretical approaches or are viewed as static. The transition to viewing the relationship *as a process* is relevant even as social work moves toward revaluing professional relationships (Folgheraiter, 2004). It is noteworthy that not all social workers are engaged in clinical practice. The strong emphasis on relational thinking from a clinical perspective may not translate to those studying policy or macro-level interventions; however, some community-practice researchers are embracing notions of reflexivity and the use of self (arguably relational ideas) as a central component to mezzo-level practice (Lafrenière, 2007; Shragge, 2007).

In summation, when we begin to deconstruct the concept of relationships, we can find ourselves at the crossroads of theories and practices. The complexities of these subject matters make it challenging to mark the boundaries of each idea and identifying the professional relationship theoretically becomes troublesome as these theories continue to develop.

**Professional Relationship: Troublesome Knowledge**

The notion of a professional relationship can be considered ‘troublesome knowledge’ which has been defined as knowledge that is not clearly defined, intangible and may be counterintuitive or intellectually absurd (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 7). The definition of professional relationship is not clearly established in the literature or by the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW); however, the College does offer some insights regarding the boundaries and components of the professional relationship. Clients and social workers participate together in setting and evaluating goals; social workers respect clients and are aware of their values, attitudes and needs as well as the manner in which these impact their relationship with clients. The client’s needs and interests are of paramount importance in the context of professional relationship (OCSWSSW, 2008, p. 3-4). It is puzzling that the OCSWSSW does not critically address the power of the social worker as a factor that needs to be considered, given the postmodern trend to explore power by critical social workers (see Brookfield, 2009; D’Cruz et al., 2007; Fook, 1999; Heron, 2005; Mandell, 2008; Xu, 2010).

By contrast, the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) outlines in its practice standards (2006) that power (along with trust, respect, professional intimacy and empathy) forms a key component of the nurse-client relationship. The CNO standards state: “The appropriate use of power, in a caring manner, enables the nurse to partner with the client to meet the client’s needs. A misuse of power is considered abuse” (p. 4). I find it puzzling that a professional college regulating provincial social work practice does not make an explicit statement about the potential to abuse clients through the misuse of power, particularly when the college of nursing has been clear in its inclusion. What the Ontario College of Social Work does suggest is that power needs to be considered in light of boundary violations (OCSWSSW, 2008, p. 12) and that social

workers are sensitive to imbalances of power (p. 13). I mention power at this point as I believe this is another concept which is related to professional relationships and is also a concept that is troublesome; a topic I will return to in the discussion.

Social work is in need of a medium to develop and maintain relationship-based thinking to mitigate some of the unhelpful impacts of new managerialism, bureaucratization, and neo-liberalism and to foster development at the micro and mezzo levels of practice. The relational emphasis is difficult to locate in social work training and ongoing professional education (Castonguay et al., 1996; Trevithick, 2003). Wang (2012) argues for a relational teaching method that incorporates teacher qualities, countertransference, authenticity, culture and institutional climate, students, and environmental considerations, which are all reflected upon in order to allow for a relational teaching experience. Such models of teaching highlight the centrality of the teaching role within the development of social workers. Too often, the deeply personal relationship between the teacher and student gets neglected, making experientially based learning (education through encounters) with others difficult to locate within education (Ashton, 2010; Baldwin, Jr., 2000; Mishna & Rasmussen, 2001; Wang, 2012).

Neglecting the relational emphasis in education exacerbates the absence of a relational focus in a highly bureaucratized field where practice takes place. To counter this absence, Tosone (2004) states, "Relational social work is the practice of using the therapeutic relationship as the principal vehicle to affect change in client's systemic functioning, referring to the inherent interconnection of the intrapsychic and interpersonal and larger community systems" (p. 481). Tosone goes on to state it is the relationship that acts as a catalyst for client change, adding that relationship is asymmetrical yet mutual and is contextually based. Moreover, relational social

work practice adopts a postmodern approach to practice and remains open for new theory as well as empirical findings to elaborate on professional relationship.

### **Central Research Question**

Informed by the literature above, this dissertation study asks the following question:

*What does the concept of “professional relationship” mean to MSW students?*

I want to explore this question as I am curious about how students view professional relationships and which theories inform their understanding. My interest in this area is attributed to the fact that I have experienced the tension in the field of social work to produce results, balance time as well as resources for clients and ensure the utilization of evidence-based practices. This left me feeling stranded between serving the agency and serving the client. There was little room to discuss the relationships I had with clients, to consider the impact I had on their treatment process as well as the impact of the clients on me as a social worker. In addition, I am deeply interested in the educational context where social work students learn about professional practice and wonder whether that experience is relational in nature. The focus on students arose from both my field facilitation and in-class teaching experiences. I have observed many students desperate for tangible skills yet reluctant to consider concepts of relationality.

The beginning of my doctoral education coincided with my beginning to teach graduate level social workers. I was curious about the process of learning, particularly since there is little written in the literature about teaching professional relationships to students. The scholarship of teaching and learning as it applies to social work curriculum has begun to appear in the literature (see Birkenmaier et al, 2007; Fox, 2013; Grise-Owens, Owens, & Miller, 2016; Roche et al., 1999; Van, Soest & Garcia, 2003; Wehbi, 2009; Witkins & Saleebey, 2007); however, I was unable to locate specific information to inform the teaching of relationships, specifically. This

gap led to my interest in talking to students about how they understood and made meaning of the professional relationship. The following section will highlight the theoretical framework that guided my thinking, the design, and approach to analyzing the data from this study.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

In pursuing my research question, *what does the concept of “professional relationship” mean to MSW students?* I will use constructivist grounded theory to explore student understanding regarding professional relationships, the theories that are associated by students with relational concepts, and the manner in which they envision the translation of relational concepts into practice. While I acknowledge that a grounded theory methodology will allow for theory to emerge from the data, I wish to acknowledge my own identity and influences upon the commencement of this research. These include social constructionism and Foucauldian theories, which inform how meaning is created and how “professionalism” is deconstructed. Additionally, two-person psychologies are utilized to conceptualize the worker/client relationship I refer to and highlight some underpinning ideas of relational practices.

#### **Social constructionism.**

In the social constructionist view, knowledge and meaning are created through language, dialogue, and social institutions (Cait, 2008). McNamee & Gergen (1992) suggest that social constructionism is an integrative vehicle to capture alternatives “to the traditional view of scientist-therapist” (p. 3). Some examples include critical social workers who acknowledge their work is not politically, morally, or valuationally neutral, or feminist scholars who point at oppressive and patriarchal practices. Furthermore, social constructionism strives to decenter the professional as the expert, while critiquing the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in “truth.” I agree with Davis & Roberts (1985) that “personal [and professional] relationships do

not exist within a vacuum, but are enacted by joint (or solo) participation in a range of social practices available within the society” (p. 149).

Central to social constructionist thought is the idea that seemingly objective entities, such as society and self, are created subjectively by our own cognitive processes. The social world as we know it is believed to be manufactured through human interaction and language. Society is not viewed as a pre-existent domain, but is the product of people engaging with one another (Gergen, 1994). What is relevant to point out here is that constructivism and social constructionism are different: “constructivists acknowledge that individuals construct their own view of the world,” while social constructionists argue that those individual constructs occur and develop in a social world where “different constructions have different social power” (Harper & Spellman, 2006, p. 100). These ideas are grounded in the postmodern notion that the discourse itself shapes relationships between people, professions, institutions and cultural values (Lax, 1992).

Social work practices based on social construction rely heavily on several premises (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, p. 27-28). One premise is the client’s linguistic system, which suggests that clients are best able to describe themselves as opposed to an outside “objective” observer attempting to describe them. In this framing, communication has a relevance specific to the exchange within which it occurs. Another premise is that we cannot have meaning or understanding until we initiate a communicative action and engage in meaning-making as a discourse. The conversation is a mutual exploration through dialogue, a “two way exchange, a criss-crossing of ideas in which new meanings are continually evolving toward the ‘dis-solving’ of problems” (p. 27), which leads to a co-created meaning-making discourse. It is in this spirit of

meaning making that this dissertation takes a social constructionist lens through the methodology, which will be explored further in the methodology chapter.

Social construction has evolved from a sociological theory to a theoretical underpinning in the realm of social work practice. For example, child maltreatment has been considered as a socially constructed phenomenon “which reflects values and opinions of a particular culture at a particular time” (Department of Health, 1995, p. 15). Social constructionism allows for a social work where:

[R]elativities, uncertainties and contingencies are no longer seen as marginal... but as central and pervasive (Parton & Marshall, 1998, p. 243). Furthermore, it is a social work which celebrates the ‘surface’ response (Howe, 1996); advocates the dispersal of power (Rojek et al., 1988); deconstructs ‘moralizing’ and ‘normalizing’ tendencies in professional practice (Donzelot, 1980); instigates re-authorship of personal narratives (De Shazer, 1988; White & Epston, 1990); and analyses how linguistic practices and texts shape social work encounters (Jokinen et al., 1999) (as cited by Houston, 2001, p. 848). Social constructionism has been criticized for being insensitive to the issues of power (Gergen 1994). Gergen acknowledges that power deserves attention; however, he questions whether power should be a grounding concept within social constructionism. He asks, what does the concept of power refer to? Gergen points towards various forms of power (see Foucault, 1979; Luke, 1974; Giddens, 1976; Parsons, 1964) and acknowledges Machiavellian and Marxist views where power has been constructed quite differently.

### **Foucault and power.**

Foucault (1980) is critical of power depicted as a commodity and writes: “Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away”

(p. 94). Rather, power is relational and “becomes apparent when exercised” (Townley, 1993, p. 520). Foucault (1997) adds:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (p. 194)

It is because of the relational aspects of power, how power is embodied and enacted within those relationships that make a Foucauldian perspective relevant to this study.

We question power to explore how hegemonic notions are produced as systems of power that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others (Mumby, 1998). Social constructions are neither arbitrary nor the product of consensus among social groups. Rather, they are rooted in power and reflect the ability of the rich and powerful to “fix” meaning in ways that privilege those forms of reality that serve the interest of the powerful (p. 167-168).

Post-structuralism concerns itself with power, subjectivities and discourse as well as an expanded version of social constructionism which includes power. While the literature on post-structuralism is broad and has been applied to various academic fields, critical social work has remained keen on using Foucault’s analyses in its theories (see Fook, 2002; Garrity, 2010; Healy, 2000). I am particularly interested in “the ways in which a person gives meaning to themselves, others and the world” (Davies & Banks, 1992, p. 2) regarding professional relationships. This meaning is formulated through discourses, which Foucault (1972) viewed as a set of ways of thinking, talking and writing about a social phenomenon. Within this framework of thought, students can no longer be seen as passive (Jones, 2006). Rather, they actively take up

as their own, or resist the discourses they are taught throughout their social work education and their induction into professional practice.

Foucault (1979a, 1979b, 1980) conceived of power as potentially productive and disciplinary. Power produces subjects, objects, realities and truths, but can be disciplinary in that those with power observe, measure and make normalizing judgments. The latter has been described as a common practice within educational institutions (Ninnes & Burnett, 2003). Additionally, professionalism leads to institutionalized or disciplinary control of the practices utilized by professionals (Abbott, 1988; Fournier, 1999; Freidson, 2001).

### **Two-person psychologies: Underpinning a relational paradigm.**

The writings on two-person psychologies have been particularly useful to my thinking when considering the underlying assumptions of relationally based practices. Spezzano (1996) argued that in order to conceptualize a relational *paradigm* (my emphasis), three main areas must be addressed: the epistemological, ontological, and developmental. Other authors have contributed to the discussion around these areas and how they contribute to a relational understanding of the person, as well as the implications of those assumptions within practice (see Aron, 1996; Frederickson, 2005; Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Seligman, 2012; Spencer, 2000; Wachtel, 2008; Wasserman, 1999); however, Spezzano (1996) is the only author who has woven them together as a method of identifying a relational paradigm.

### ***Epistemology.***

When thinking of epistemology as it applies to the professional relationship, I am interested in the ways professionals understand, or claim to understand, anything about someone else's mind, self, or unconscious, as well as their own. There are distinct differences between one-person and two-person psychologies when considering what we know about another. In one-

person paradigms, there is a private mind that works to “construct a picture of an outside world of other people” (Borradori, 1994, p. 50). This requires a working knowledge of one’s own mind prior to knowing another. This type of knowing is highlighted by the empiricism embedded in audits as well as managerialist organizations that focus on the *intervention* as something done to a person. Two-person psychologies on the other hand, assume that conscious insight and intervention mark an event while in dialogue with another person and are not the achievement of a private and solitary mind. Another person, therefore, is required to achieve a sense of knowing one’s self (Spezzano, 1996). In a study on the use of self in social work practice, a participant stated “[Y]ou can’t see yourself because your eyes are cut to see outwards. You need somebody else to look back on yourself. You need other eyes” (Adamowich, et al., 2014, p. 136). This conception of self brings forward terms such as intersubjective, dialogical, perspectivist, social constructionist and post-structuralist to inform as to how we understand what we know, or can know, about our unconscious processes and our self. Interventions from a two-person lens are something done *with* another person.

Aligning with social constructivist views, a relational paradigm acknowledges the inextricability of individuals from their social context and places priority on language used to structure relationships and reality (Aron, 1996; Neimeyer, 2007; Seligman, 2012; Spezzano, 1996). Language in this case is not only the manner in which we communicate our reality to one another, but represents the medium through which our realities are constructed. Spence (1982) argued that therapy is an active construction by means of a narrative about an individual’s life. The acknowledgment of the social context is relevant to social work practice, which often considers how this context influences and interacts with a client’s experience.

***Ontology.***

In shifting from what we can know or claim to know about another, I now consider the essentials of human nature, the ontological realm of two-person psychologies. Spezzano (1996) suggests that in the case of one-person psychologies, feelings or affect are to become conscious through thought and language. The assumption that our mind could automatically become aware of its full range of psychological activity is intrinsic in such an approach. In a two-person psychology, “an individual’s self-reflexive consciousness is not an outgrowth of unconscious mentation...we must think of consciousness as a creation of multiple minds...Consciousness is both necessary and understandable only because there are other minds besides one’s own” (Spezzano, 1996, p. 608). This moves our understanding away from the belief that there *is* something inside, which is independent and can be observed, to the notion that our consciousness is infused with our own subjectivity (Wachtel, 2008). This makes a solitary, one-person theory of mind impossible, as there is “no way to explain the origins of consciousness” (Spezzano, 1996, p. 609), thereby making a two-person understanding of consciousness incompatible with one-person psychologies.

If knowing another is a relational process between two people, the ontological ‘being as a person’ must take precedence over the epistemological knowing of that person. Assuming we exist as persons, our knowledge about one another or how we know them does not cause them to exist. This idea challenges the constructionist epistemology and aligns with the social constructionist perspective. Frederickson (2005) contends that in a world of constructions, we lose sight of who created those constructions (p. 75), which necessitates an ontological understanding of another prior to an epistemological knowing of that person. This relational

process of knowing our Self and Other causes us to reflect on how is it that we develop as people. I will now turn to the developmental implications of two-person psychologies.

***Development.***

Many theorists have noted the importance and centrality of relationships in human development (see Baldwin, 1913; Mead, 1934; Ferenczi, 1933; Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1960). At the developmental level, the main emphasis is on the ways in which relational sources contribute to the managing of (or failing to manage) affect regulation. Emotional and psychological developments are considered possible through the relational mechanism between children and their parents/caregivers; by extension, the therapeutic dyad between clients and their therapists. For example, from a two-person perspective, Spezzano (1996) explains that children who display anxiety do so in order to elicit anxiety-reducing responses from others: “Depending on what these others do and what opportunities for action they allow or prohibit, the anxiety will escalate, stabilize, or diminish” (p. 606). The salient point from this example is the context of relationship. We are born with affective systems (Weinberg & Tronick, 1994), making our development distinct by connecting with other people. When considering the development of our self, we cannot view it without also considering the relationship from a two-person perspective. The self and the relationship are inextricable from one another (Spencer, 2000). As Seligman (2012) highlights, “relationships between children and the people that care for them—*emotionally as well as physically*—are at the core of the developmental process” (p. 65).

Building on the developmental theories, feminist psychology emerged to suggest that connection, disconnection and reconnection are developmental processes requiring mutual empathy and engagement (Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1995, 1997). Development is not a

linear completion of stages; it becomes a process through which the self emerges and grows through relationship with others (Gilligan et al., 1990). Through the writings on the Relational Cultural model, it has been documented that two-person psychologies view the goal of therapy as augmenting the capacity for relationship, instead of individuation as the goal of one-person models (Spencer, 2000).

To summarize, the epistemology of two-person psychologies suggests that it is through our interacting subjectivities that we understand one another. Ontologically, one must exist as a person prior to being known, and our development is driven towards a capacity for connection with those around us, inclusive of the worker/client relationship. These notions provide the underlying assumptions for a relational paradigm and have been central to my own thinking about the nature of professional relationships for social work.

Aron (1996b) described a need to understand the relational elements of our development and ways of knowing. To do this, we must be able to “see” the person across from us. There are still great tensions between these ideas, which primarily stem from one-person and two-person paradigms being polarized (Spezzano, 1996). The research from a two-person paradigm however, cannot be dismissed so readily within our current context. This either/or mentality seems reminiscent of the debates between technique and relationship as noted earlier in this chapter. Slowly, we are beginning to see the space for integration as opposed to segregation of perspectives.

The ontology of relational assumptions, which is that we need an Other to be known, seems appropriate to social work practice. Social work value statements are replete with the notion that relationship plays a key role in the functioning of our professional practice (CASW, 2005). This value is rooted in the belief that it is through the relationship that we know our

clients, can formulate interventions, and can evaluate whether or not our clients are benefiting from our work. If the relationship assumes a central role, we must have a mechanism to account for our role within the relationship. There are various thoughts regarding our own accountability in the relationship, such as countertransference, use of self, and critical reflection, to cite a few examples.

Taking on a two-person relational paradigm will also have implications for the social worker. I often find my students wanting to know the “right” answer, what to say, what to do, or how to be with clients who face any number of problems. This type of “right” thinking reflects the one-person notions that treatment is something done to a client. Shifting into the two-person paradigm implies emphasis on the treatment as an event in dialogue between two people. Instead of a focus on “doing” something to a client, there is a need to leverage the relationship to find meaning in the focus of our work with clients. This process might involve a “doing” through psychoeducation or teaching a coping strategy, but relationship must come first.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have pointed towards theories that have informed professionalism and relational practices. Wanting to ensure a critical lens is implemented in this study, conversations about power, locating our practices within a socially constructed world and being aware of the assumptions embedded in a relational paradigm have been useful as an anchor for this study. They have provided helpful tools to conceptualize the assumptions underpinning relational practices (two-person psychologies), to explore the power dynamics of these relationships (Foucault), and to facilitate meaning making based on participants’ perspectives and experiences (Social Constructionism). The next chapter will explore the study’s methodology.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The research question: *What does the concept of “professional relationship” mean to MSW students?* is open ended and exploratory; hence, it is suitable for a qualitative research approach. This study focused on student understanding regarding professional relationship and theories that inform this concept. My aim was to explore the understanding of: (a) how students understand or make meaning of the idea of professional relationships as they become professional social workers; (b) student perceptions about the aspects of a professional relationship (power relations, reflexivity, ethics, use of self, etc.) and which theoretical perspectives they draw from to inform their understanding, and; (c) how they perceive their understanding of the professional relationship is applied in their practice. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the complexity of the subject matter, this chapter will focus on an in-depth description of how and why I selected the methodology of constructivist grounded theory. I will outline this study’s research design including how participants were recruited, the methods of data collection, as well as the process of data analysis.

#### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was designed to generate theories rooted in real-world situations. While it has had multiple variations (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007), it has also been used widely within the realm of social work given its applicability in practice situations (Oktay, 2012). Furthermore, grounded theory is useful while engaging in research that will commence a new area of study. Additionally, grounded theory is rooted in the perspective of participants, as opposed to a particular theoretical orientation. Grounded theory will facilitate theoretical understandings of participants’ experiences. In addition, the flexible nature of grounded theory allows for the application to various epistemological frameworks (Charmaz, 2006). Given this

orientation, the issues of external validity, namely random selection and sufficiency of numbers, were less relevant to this study than what is usually the case with positivist research (Henderson, 1991; Riley, 1996).

In particular, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory was used in this study. The interaction between the researcher and the data, which constructs a theory, aligns with the relational epistemologies as noted earlier. Moreover, this methodology assumes that participants construct their own realities which are shaped by social interaction (Charmaz, 1990). This is applicable as I was curious about the inculcatory nature of social work education and how academic experiences shape student understanding about professional relationships. Further, there was an element of curiosity about which theories students utilize to inform their understanding. This interaction with participants and their experiences, their education and perhaps their mentors, supports the use of grounded theory as a methodology. The data was mutually co-created by the participants and the researcher throughout the interview process, which became an interpretation of reality (Charmaz, 2006). This interpretation also allowed for the creation of a theory drawn from the data, which could be used as a premise for future research (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As an inductive approach used to explore social interactions and processes (Charmaz, 2006) and an approach that explores experiential knowledge (Wee & Paterson, 2009), this methodology fit the study's research question: *What does the concept of "professional relationship" mean to MSW students?* I understand this meaning to be constructed by both experiential knowledge (provided through life experience, social work practice experience and MSW practicum experience) and through interactions with the learning environment (course content, reading, theoretical knowledge). I was curious about the process students go through to

develop (and understand the nature of) professional relationships. I selected constructivist grounded theory given the theoretical and process-orientated nature of the concept of professional relationships.

Constructivist grounded theory aligns with the spirit of critical inquiry (Charmaz, 1990, 2006) and allowed for links to be created between the data while maintaining a focus on the interaction of that data within larger social contexts (Dominelli et al., 2005). In this study, grounded theory helped express how participants felt that being professional is at odds with being relational: especially within a neo-liberal practice environment.

Constructivist grounded theory aligns with this study's purpose and research question, but also contributes to its intended application. The knowledge translation will be useful to social work educators, students, and practitioners to deepen their understanding of how professionalism is embodied within social work, but also to provide a framework for considering the relational aspects of practice espoused by value statements and professional practice statements.

### **Ethical Principles**

This research followed the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Participation in the research project was completely voluntary and each participant was provided with an informed consent letter (see Appendix 1). All identifying information of the participants was kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, by conducting interviews in private rooms at the university, and securing storage of participant contact information via password protected and encrypted digital files. Audiotapes and written transcriptions of the data will be destroyed after five years. Participants were informed of the benefits of the research to themselves, social work scholarship and education, and professional practice. They were advised of the dissemination processes of the findings. While I anticipated

very little to no risk of psychological harm for participants, risks arising out of the disclosure of personal information were minimized through opportunities to review personal quotes prior to submission as well as an optional review of the final paper.

Beyond the institutional ethics however, as a study on relationship demands, I also employed professional ethical principles in order to address relevant issues of power and relational processes of Self and Other within my relationships with participants, such as engaging in member checking regarding final codes or reviews of quotes prior to publication. The relevant issues regarding power and relational processes may have affected the participants. As I am a doctoral candidate within the faculty of social work, the participants could potentially have been in a course I have taught. This pre-established relationship where I had the power as an instructor may have been helpful for some participants, and troublesome for others. I ensured that I spoke to participants about their feelings around my being the primary researcher particularly if I had taught the student previously. There was only one participant who had previously been in a course where I had been the instructor and this participant did not raise any concerns with our previous history.

The risks were related to the students' perceptions of their own learning should they have been unable or unclear as to how to answer the guided questions. Students potentially may have felt inadequate, ill equipped, or judged particularly if I had taught the student previously. I used my reflexive field notes to explore this power dynamic within my research. I sought to use inclusive language and utilized cues from participants to explore power imbalances, or any direct reference to power experienced by students within the scope of the research (for example, do students talk about power as it relates to relationships?), and also as participants within this

study<sup>2</sup>. To minimize the risk that participants shaped their responses based on our previous student/instructor relationship, I proposed to use the dialogue of the interview to clarify what participants were stating and to dig deeper into the meaning of the topics participants discussed. This allowed for a discussion about whether they were shaping their responses to say what they thought I wanted to hear. It is also noteworthy that the courses I had taught in previous years had been focused on theories of human development, trauma and data analysis. While there is a presence of relationality within these courses, the emphasis had been on other topics. I hoped that students who had been in my class previously were able to speak about the professional relationship as this has not been a formal part of the discussion within these courses.

It was also relevant to acknowledge that students might have me as an instructor after this research is completed or may see me in the hallway at the FSW. Students do have the option of selecting their courses and instructors, as generally there are multiple sections of the same course so they are highly unlikely to ever find themselves in a position to have to be in my class if they did not wish to be. Further, I made it part of the consent process that students were aware that participating in this study would not impact any future grades in their courses should I be their instructor. I have not been an instructor in this particular faculty since the proposal of this dissertation study, so issues related to having myself as a professor were not relevant to the participants since I no longer was employed as a contract staff. To clarify, no issues or challenges relating to my role as an instructor arose from the participants.

I recognize the fact that I am located in global and local societal relations of power. I brought these deeply ingrained positions into this research and see the need to engage in critical reflection of my use of self, social location and position, to minimize the effects of oppressive

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<sup>2</sup> Notions of power are discussed at length in the findings and discussion.

power relations. As such, power emerged within the categories and the discussion of the findings this dissertation presents. I want to acknowledge that ethical egalitarian research requires constant engagement in critical reflection and a constant examination of research practices throughout the research processes and products. I intended to remain true to the language of my participants within my coding process, formulations and any descriptions I authored. I understand the need to disseminate findings in ways that respect the perspective of participants and contribute to the learning of professional relationship within the social work field.

### **Research Process**

This study included four phases: (1) screening and recruitment; (2) data collection (3) data analysis, and; (4) application of theory. It is noteworthy that data collection and data analysis are simultaneous iterative processes within the grounded theory methodology. I will now describe the details of the research process.

#### **Phase one: Recruitment & screening.**

In September 2015, I received approval for this study from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. From October to December 2015, I recruited participants for the dissertation study. Students were invited to participate in the study via email, through advertisements posted within the Faculty of Social Work and by visiting classrooms to introduce myself, the study and to provide information for students regarding the study. These students were currently enrolled in the MSW program at Wilfrid Laurier University and included first year, second year, part time, advanced standing, and Aboriginal Field of Study (AFS) students. First and second year students entered the MSW program without a BSW. Advanced Standing students entered the MSW program with a BSW. The part time program is arranged in a similar fashion. The AFS program combines a wholistic Indigenous worldview with contemporary

social work practice and includes the use of Indigenous elders, a traditional circle process, and Indigenous ceremonies.

This recruitment strategy was feasible from a time perspective; it allowed students to reflect and discuss their experiences through the program. It involved students at various points throughout their MSW education and captured a diverse student population, which helped promote diverse perspectives in the discussion (Kitzinger, 1995). Students attending the MSW program hail from various provinces and countries, are of various ages and life stages, and bring varying levels of social work experience.

### ***Screening.***

I requested interested participants to contact me via email or telephone/text message to demonstrate their interest in the study. The screening criteria were explained in all advertisements for the study (email, in person and posters). The screening criteria required participants to be current students at the faculty of social work completing their MSW degree. During this initial screening conversation, I explained the study and provided students with a digital copy of the consent form (appendix 1) to review via email. In case they wished to continue to participate, they were invited for an interview where we signed hard copies of the consent form, which have been stored in a locked file cabinet until destruction. After the completion of the screening phase, I invited participants to take part in a semi-structured interview arranged at a mutually convenient time. Participants were requested to complete a demographic information sheet (appendix 2) to aid in describing the participants within the study. This demographic information could have possibly been used to capture patterns regarding diversity (ethnicity, race, faith/religious affiliation, gender, program length, previous work experience, professional interests) should they emerge in the data; however, participants

were similar in their responses to the interview questions despite demographic differences. Additionally, participants requested their relevant cultural information remain disconnected from their data, to assist in their confidentiality.

***Incentive.***

To promote involvement in the study, participants were invited to participate in a draw for a \$200 prepaid VISA card, which was randomly drawn upon completion of the data collection phase in December 2015. This invitation was clarified in the email, poster and in-person recruitment information. The odds of winning this VISA card were predicated on the number of participants involved in the study. While I anticipated about 12-15 participants in total, the odds of winning the incentive were reported at 1/20 to allow for additional participants should the grounded theory method require additional information until the saturation point. It should be noted that the winning participant received notice in December 2015 that they had won; however, due to scheduling conflicts they didn't pick up the gift card until February 2016.

**Phase two: Sampling and data collection.**

Sampling in grounded theory is driven by the developing theory. As the study progresses, the theory will evolve and the sampling criteria may change over the course of the study; therefore, it is not fully determined in advance. The aim of the sampling is to facilitate data collection that will allow for the incorporation of various views and responses into the construction of a theory. Since this cannot be determined in advance, a sampling strategy is not predetermined since it could restrict theory development (Oktay, 2012). Initial sampling methods were used in the study to recruit participants from the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. For this study, it was important to hear from students in each field of study of the MSW program to ensure that the meaning could be clarified should there be differences between

the participants. As participants were selected based on the common criterion of being in an MSW program, a certain level of homogeneity can be assumed. Despite the common status as a student of the MSW program, a certain degree of heterogeneity in the sample was anticipated. Advanced standing, two-year, part-time advanced standing, part-time regular track and aboriginal field of study attract different types of students. Some had years of practice experience while others came directly from their undergraduate work. Some students spent one year attaining their degree, others spent up to four years. Moreover, participants have a choice in which field of study they will focus on: Individuals, Families, and Groups (IFG), Community, Policy, Planning and Organization (CPPO), or an integrated stream which combines content from both IFG and CPPO courses; however, integrated students still select a primary and secondary focus. Lastly, the aboriginal field of study program combines a wholistic Indigenous worldview as noted. In addition, students have varying focal interests within the field of social work and bring different cultural backgrounds that may reveal different perspectives about the professional relationship. Each of these voices were represented in the data. Through the process of initial sampling, subsequent research studies can build upon the findings from this study and move towards theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling will highlight which participants, questions and observations may further the analysis and completeness of the categories which emerged from this study (O'Callaghan, 2012).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants until reaching theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation was initially defined by observing “no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can develop properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). This definition has been expanded to carefully consider the saturation of the properties of a theoretical category (Charmaz, 2008) which is different from thematic or other qualitative

forms of data saturation. Theoretical saturation refers to categories that are fully accounted for, where differences between categories are explained by the emerging theorizing of the data (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Conversely, thematic or data saturation is said to occur when no new patterns or themes are emerging in the data (Patel, 2015). As an example, in this study the category how participants learn within the classroom was part of the data early in the collection process and assisted in probing subsequent participants around their experiences. Moreover, the ideas of learning from field placements, and other mentors also contributed to category of learning.

The operationalization of data saturation has been poorly represented in the literature, although a study in 2006 suggested that 12 interviews demonstrates a 92% saturation level for a given category (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Moreover, the concept of theoretical saturation has been critiqued as researchers often have no method of knowing when a category has been fully accounted for as there is always an option for new/more data (Wray, Markovic & Manderson, 2007). This critique supports the use of initial sampling within this study, as this study is introductory and will facilitate further research. I utilized the literature on such topics to assist with knowing the boundaries of a particular category, particularly as I was analyzing the data and seeing how theory helped to explain the data. The discussion chapter explains these connections fully.

### ***Semi-structured interviewing.***

Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research (Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in generating data, which can be analyzed in a variety of ways. Moreover, the interview is a directed conversation (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, 1995) that allows for an in-depth exploration of a

particular topic. The interview questions asked participants to describe and reflect upon their experiences in a way that rarely occurs in everyday life. This allows for the generation of theory or at the very least, to uncover new themes and concepts (Creswell, 1998). Charmaz (2006) explains that interviews allow an interviewer to:

- (a) go beneath the surface of the described experience(s)
- (b) stop to explore a statement or topic
- (c) request greater detail or explanation
- (d) ask about the participant's thoughts, feelings and actions
- (e) keep the participant on the subject
- (f) come back to an earlier point
- (g) restate the participants point to check for accuracy
- (h) slow or quicken the pace
- (i) shift the immediate topic
- (j) validate the participant's humanity, perspective, or action
- (k) use observational and social skills to further the discussion
- (l) respect the participant and express appreciation for participating (p. 26).

Charmaz suggests that participants hold the conversational prerogatives, which allows for storytelling and the emergence of a coherent frame, to reflect upon earlier events, to be experts and to share significant experiences, and teach the interviewer how to interpret these experiences (p. 27).

Semi-structured interviews were particularly suited to this study as they allow the researcher flexibility to pursue issues of significance to the research question while also allowing for exploration and clarification of comments made by the participants. Semi-structured interviews have been considered congruent with a grounded theory methodology given their flexibility in the sequencing of questions and in the depth of exploration (Duffy, Ferguson, & Watson, 2004; Fielding, 1994; Hand, 2003; Rose, 1994). The interviews allowed participants to

help shape the content of the interviews, thus shaping the data and the theory emerging from the data. This process allowed other perspectives that possibly have not been captured by the literature available to me. The impetus for this study stemmed from a gap in the literature regarding the definition and teaching of professional relationships. Interviews allowed for the generation of new ideas through participant interaction while the grounded theory methodology helped to theorize how participants made meaning and utilize the concepts of the professional relationship.

I utilized an interview guide (see appendix 3) to focus the conversation with participants and ensure that the scope of the sub-questions was covered. All interviews were held in a private office at the Faculty of Social Work in Kitchener, ON. Participants arrived at a scheduled time and were given an opportunity to ask questions about the consent form. After signing the consent form, it was explained that the interview was being audio recorded and would be transcribed shortly after the interview was completed. Each interview ranged from 55 minutes to 75 minutes. Transcripts were created using a platform called "transcribe" (<https://transcribe.wreally.com/>), where I uploaded audio files and then typed out the transcripts by hand. The software assisted with the pacing of the audio recordings, allowed me to reverse or slow down sections, and also provided a word processor. These transcripts were exported to Microsoft Word and eventually uploaded to a qualitative data analysis program (AtlasTI) for coding and organization. Interviews were transcribed within 48 hours of the face-to-face meeting.

Several respondents began their interview by requesting clarification as to what was meant by the professional relationship: Did this mean the relationship between colleagues, or the relationship between the social worker and the client? Participants were appreciative to have the interview guide to assist their thinking and found the prompts helpful. They struggled with

articulating the concepts related to professionalism, power, and relational practices. They utilized narratives and described personal experiences in an attempt to demonstrate what they were trying to say, particularly when they could not find language. It was interesting how easily participants avoided questions they did not feel comfortable answering. This occurred when they were asked directly about their own values, perspectives and beliefs. I believe that participants were nervous about the fact that by describing experiences that were relational, they were being unprofessional. The fear of being perceived as unprofessional was evident throughout the course of this process and is reflected in the findings. It was as though being relational and professional could not co-exist within the same narrative.

The question: ‘Would you say your ideas about what a professional relationship means or looks like, has changed as a result of your learning in the program (class or field)?’ was modified early in the interview process, as participants struggled to provide concrete examples about what they were learning within their classes. Indeed, most participants report little to no conversations about professionalism or professional relationships within their education, thus making it difficult to answer this question. Participants did describe that they were changed by their own experiences with helpers, mentors or through their field experience. The question was modified to ask (a) if participants have noted a change in their understanding or the meaning they make of professional relationships, and if so, (b) what led to that change. They seemed more equipped to answer this modified question.

The constructivist grounded theory methodology allows for the overlapping of data collection and initial data analysis. The process of data collection, individual interviews, memo-writing, transcription and member checking occurred within 48 hours of the research interview. This allowed me to analyze the transcripts broadly and begin the coding process. The process of

analysis allowed for a more nuanced form of questioning as I moved on to other research participants. I could prompt participants better once I could acknowledge their struggle. Interestingly, when participants seemed to struggle with how they would be perceived as social work students, I suspect it was the relationship they formed with me, along with the promise of confidentiality that allowed them to be more honest in their responses. Additionally, I would often engage in a dialogue with participants, which aligns with the co-constructed nature of data gathered using Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory. As an example, I could ask follow-up questions, clarify meanings and explore terminology. These dialogues assisted me to ensure that I had encapsulated the meaning of what the participants were describing accurately. Further, the member checking of these transcripts ensured that participants were clear with what they intended to say.

### **Phase three: Data analysis.**

As suggested in the literature regarding constructivist grounded theory, data collection and data analysis occurred as a concurrent process (Webb & Kevern, 2001). After each interview was conducted, I engaged in memo-writing as this prompted me to analyze the data and begin coding early in the research process. This process enabled me to capture my thoughts and impressions, tentative comparisons and the connections made, and crystallize questions along with the directions to pursue. Memos act as a documentation of the researcher's thinking processes rather than a description of a social context (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). Additionally, initial codes in the memos were used to create and define categories emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist elements of this methodology allowed me to create categories rooted in the language and experiences of the participants rather than my interpretation of their narratives. Note taking and memos are emphasized differently within

qualitative research methods. Code notes, theoretical notes, operational notes, diagrams, logical diagrams, and integrative diagrams (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) have been identified within various methodologies; however, for this study, I align with Glaser's (1998) position that memos are the researcher's developing ideas about codes and their interconnections. They are simply "the meaning and ideas for one's growing theory at the moment they occur" (p. 178). I also included reflexive field notes after the memo-writing to capture context details, my own experience, opinions and reactions from these research interviews. This reflexivity was included as it aligns with the notions of relationality explored earlier and with the constructivist methodology. Moreover, this reflexivity helped me track my ideas as they emerged and shifted throughout the data analysis.

Transcripts were sent via email to research participants for member checking purposes. Participants were asked to review their transcript and provide any corrections they felt were necessary, add information they believed had been missed, and review their transcripts for any quotes they wished not be utilized in the final dissertation. Participants completed their review, on average, within one week of receiving their transcripts. Only one participant requested that she not be directly quoted; however, the information provided could be used as part of the emergent theory, if relevant. Participants were also provided with a summary of the findings at the completion of the study.

I coded and analyzed the data multiple times, coding line-by-line and creating open codes. I later refined these codes and developed axial codes: axial coding involves organizing the data into categories and subcategories and making linkages between the coded data. The next step involved turning the axial codes into theoretical codes, weaving relationships between the categories. I used constant comparative methods to establish analytic distinctions and make

comparisons at each level of analysis. (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As an example, I compared interview statements and narratives within the same interview and among different interviews. See the following table:

Table 1

*Example of Coding Process*

Transcript text	Open codes	Axial codes	Category
There is this inherent <i>power differential in relationships</i> . People are coming to you <i>for your skills, expertise and your knowledge, even in that there's a power differential</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power differential</li> <li>• Asymmetrical power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships are 'Power-ful'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships</li> </ul>
Relationship is like the word love. It's <i>not easily definable</i> . I don't really know. Maybe its one of those post-modern things that you <i>can't quantify</i> . You could <i>define it in a million different ways</i> but that's why I think its missing from the literature because it is <i>simply impossible</i> and <i>none of the definitions are exhaustive</i> so what's the point?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not easily definable</li> <li>• Can't be quantified</li> <li>• Many definitions</li> <li>• Impossible to define</li> <li>• No exhaustive definition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elusive definitions</li> </ul>	
I mean reflexivity is part of being good at relating to people. So yeah. <i>Reflexivity is like a skill for relationships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflexivity</li> <li>• Reflexivity as skill</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational Skills</li> </ul>	

<p>So in terms of ability to build rapport... I think rapport could be considered a skill that can be practiced and honed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapport building</li> <li>• Rapport as skill</li> </ul>		
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This table provides excerpts from four different participant transcripts. The italics in the text provided the basis for the open codes, which provided some of the codes for the axial codes. The connection between the axial codes became the categories. The endeavour was to obtain “thick descriptions” about participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2006) and explore student understanding of the professional relationship in addition to the theories/practices they used to base this understanding upon. Thick descriptions provide a context, so that a behaviour or topic being discussed can be made meaningful to an outsider. Another example from this study included the focus on the learning environment and a sense of anxiety around participants’ “not knowing” how to dialogue about the professional relationship. The findings will highlight these connections and contexts with more clarity.

**Phase four: Theoretical discussion.**

During the final stage of analysis, after several months of conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing the data, a theoretical discussion grounded in the data assisted in explaining the findings. While a theoretical discussion is not necessarily a component of Charmaz’s (2006) methodology, the theorizing captured the complexity of the data and moved the research beyond a description about professional relationships towards a model of how these concepts were integrated as students move through their professional education. In particular, theorizing regarding the teaching and enactment of professional relationships seemed apt for the discussion.

For this study, a new theory was not generated from the data, but rather current literature was utilized to assist in understanding the findings from this study.

To address trustworthiness, several strategies were utilized to ensure the rigor of this study. Interdisciplinary triangulation (Janesick, 2000) occurred when I explored the concept of professional relationships from other fields including psychology, medicine and nursing (see literature review). I also utilized theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 1978) to analyze the data utilizing threshold concepts and performance theory (see discussion). Additionally, I also engaged in member checking as described above to reduce the threat of reactivity, researcher bias and respondent bias (Charmaz, 2006). Lastly, I kept an audit trail (which I define as memos) to keep track of my own thinking and to reduce the threat of researcher bias.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined the rationale for using constructivist grounded theory as a methodology to study and explore MSW students' understanding of the concept of professional relationships. I also provided a description and rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary method for gathering data. I explored the nuances of co-constructed data and how the overlapping process of analyzing the data occurred simultaneously with the data collection. Last, I concluded with the ethical considerations relevant to this study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter, which focuses on the findings from the individual interviews, I first describe the participants' demographics. I then report primary findings, which have been broken down into three main thematic areas: not knowing, the bifurcation of professional / relationships, and relationship teaches relationship.

### **Participant Demographics**

This study had a total sample of 15 participants who were current MSW students at the time of recruitment and data collection. During the recruitment stage, I requested that potential participants complete a demographic information form, which requested participants to voluntarily identify their gender and age along with other factors pertaining to their field of study and their undergraduate major. Participants were also asked to share any other identities that seemed relevant to them such as culture, race, ability, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. They had the choice to leave any option blank should they not wish to respond.

Participants were between the ages of 25 to 52 years, with the mean age being 34 years old. Thirteen participants identified as female while two participants identified as male. Seven participants were in the two-year stream, five participants were in the advanced standing stream, one participant was part-time and two participants were in the aboriginal field of study (AFS) program. Four participants further identified as Christian. Three identified as Caucasian. Two participants identified as queer. Seven participants chose not to identify themselves any further. Interestingly, no participants dialogued about these identities and specifically requested their faith, sexual orientation and racial information be omitted. Participants were asked about what they studied in their undergraduate work. Regarding undergraduate major see Table 1:

Table 2

*Participants' Undergraduate Major*

Undergraduate Major	Number of Participants
Social Sciences	12
Arts	2
Physical Sciences	1
Total	15

Participants in this study were enrolled in various fields of study. Individuals, Families and Groups (IFG) focuses curriculum on social work practice with these populations and is predominantly focused on micro-level interventions. Community, Policy, Planning and Organization (CPPO) focuses curriculum on social work practice at the meso- and macro levels of practice. Students can also integrate IFG and CPPO courses to have curricula which combines coursework from each stream, although they do select one primary focus. Additionally, there is an aboriginal field of study (AFS) program which focuses on aboriginal holistic healing practices. See table 2 for the breakdown of these programs and the participants:

Table 3:

*Participants' Field of Study*

Field of Study	Number of Participants
IFG	5
IFG Integrated	2
CPPO	3
CPPO Integrated	3
AFS	2
Total	15

In addition to having various undergraduate majors and various fields of study, participants were also in various stages of their MSW education. Seven participants were in the two-year program. One of these participants was in their first year of the two-year program, while 6 of these participants were in their second year. Seven participants were in the advanced standing program, including two in the AFS stream. Lastly, one participant was in the part time advanced standing program, and was in year two of the two-year program. See Table 3 for the breakdown of these stages:

Table 4:

*Participants' Field of Study and Length of Program*

Field of Study	Two Year Program	Advanced Standing	Part Time	Total
IFG	2	2	1	5
IFG Integrated	2			2
CPPO	1	2		3
CPPO Integrated	2	1		3
AFS		2		2
Totals	7	7	1	15

It is noteworthy that students in their second year, and those in the advanced standing program, would have taken at least two courses where the concept of professional relationships was part of the curriculum: Social work practice with individuals and reflexive practices. In addition, these students would have already either been in field placement, or completed one field placement at the time of the interviews. Students in their first year of the two-year program were currently enrolled in social work practice with individuals and would have had readings and discussions about professional relationships. I mention this to highlight that the concept of professional relationships has been part of the MSW curriculum from the first semester of the program, meaning that every participant would have been exposed to some readings and

classroom discussion regarding this concept. Students in their second year and advanced standing students would have had additional course work and placement to foster their learning about professional relationships.

This sample was homogeneous in some respects (e.g. gender, education level) and heterogeneous in others (e.g. religion, age, race, sexual orientation, educational background). The homogeneity can be partially attributed to the study's method of recruiting participants from the student body of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. The sample also is predominately female (87%), which aligns with the typical percentage of gender identity within the faculty (FSW, 2016) and within the field broadly. Conversely, the differences in religion, race, and educational background mirror the diversity found within the field of social work.

In order to protect their identity, participants were assigned random names. I used the online resource 'Behind The Name' to randomly select names for participants ([www.behindthename.com/random](http://www.behindthename.com/random)).

### **Overview of Findings**

The findings of this study begin with the category "not knowing". Participants indicated they were unclear how to define or operationalize the professional relationship. This is reflective not only of participants' motivation to participate in this study (as they wanted to increase their knowledge), but also highlights how participants perceive their understanding regarding professional relationships. Additionally, participants blamed their education for their not knowing and perceived their professors and the classroom learning environment as not conducive to discussing or teaching about professional relationships. The paradox regarding this "not knowing" is that participants were indeed able to describe various aspects of professional relationships despite believing they didn't know what the concept was about. The difficulty was

that these aspects were not integrated, leading to a bifurcation of the concept “professional relationship”.

The isolation of professional from relationships constitutes the second major finding which focuses on the bifurcation of the concept “professional relationship”, where participants separated the concept into what it means to be professional or what it means to engage in a relationship. Three components emerged regarding professionalism: first, participants described the code of ethics; second, the espoused values of the profession, and third, the utility of boundaries (particularly around self-disclosure).

When addressing the other side of this bifurcated term, relationships, three components emerged: first, relationships are difficult to define; second, relational skills including building rapport and reflexivity, and third, the concept of power, which participants linked with relationships.

The final category focused on how relationships teach relationships: first, a desire for professors to bring their experiences from the field into the classroom; second, using placement supervision for mentorship and learning about professional relationships in applied contexts, and third, having been the recipient of social work services themselves.

### **Primary Findings: Not Knowing**

The first category arose early on when participants were asked about their motivation to participate in this study. They all began to speak about their lack of understanding:

I don't even know if I understand what this [professional relationship] is about. (*Jelena, two-year, year 2, IFG*)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The notations after each participant's name indicate which stream they are in and which year they were completing at the time of the research interview.

Usually research happens with topics that are concrete, where your topic of professional relationships seems like a vast sea of uncharted water, it is complex. (*Gisela, Adv.S., IFG*)

Well, I think I'm still trying to determine what a professional relationship is. That's why I'm here. I have been reflecting and thinking about that, and I don't know how to describe it. It's definitely something that I think everyone who is new to the field is facing. (*Nina, two-year, year 1, CPPO*)

I think about two things. One is professionalism and the other is relationship. (*Zoey, Adv. S., IFG*)

These quotes highlight the participants' struggle with describing the professional relationship. Gisela suggested that it is a complex concept; one that is difficult for new social workers as Nina stated. Zoey's comment named one of the major findings of this study, that the professional relationship can be bifurcated into two various concepts: one being professionalism, the other being relationship.

These participants come from various stages within the MSW program, and with differing foci; yet, they are unable to articulate clearly what they think the professional relationship is about. I expected participants near the beginning of their MSW education to struggle with the concept of professional relationships; however, participants who were nearing the end of their program also struggled with the concept. This is curious to me as it suggests they may graduate without a firm grasp of the concept, a possibility that I will explore further in these findings and in the discussion.

When probed to elaborate on their not knowing, participants blamed their not knowing on their education, specifically activities within their classrooms. Participants reported that

professional relationships were not discussed, classroom discussions were poorly facilitated, and students are not held accountable for their individual contributions. Participants were highly critical of the learning environment where they believed they would receive concrete information about professional relationships.

**The classroom: Professional relationships not discussed.**

Participant's described that their "not knowing" how to define or describe a professional relationship was due, in part, to the absence of discussions within the classroom regarding professional relationships. As Jelena (*two year, year two, IFG*) stated, "At this point, and I'm almost done the program, ready to graduate, and we haven't talked about professional relationships at all". Nina (*two-year, year 1, CPPO*) added:

This meeting [the research interview] right now is the first time that I've talked about ...professional relationships. I haven't talked about it at all. We haven't talked about what the professional identity means, we haven't talked about what that means to be a professional. We haven't made links to the professional relationships; we haven't talked about it in [our] courses. It is just an assumed thing. It does need to be spoken about and addressed.

Cate (*Adv.S., AFS*) expressed:

You know to be honest, they [professors] talk about the idea of professional relationships and professional imperatives but I don't think we really get into the understanding of what being a professional is or what implications there are on how we practice.

These three quotes capture a unanimous attitude from the participants: That classroom discussions left them wondering how to define and operationalize professional relationships for social work. Interestingly, these participants are at various points within their MSW education

and studying different streams. Jelena, by the time of the research interview, had taken courses where the professional relationship is part of the curriculum; specifically these courses were Social Work Practice with Individuals and Reflexive Practices. Nina is at the beginning of her education, but has also been in courses where the professional relationship is a topic in course syllabi. Cate, as an advanced standing student, has a BSW so presumably she would have explored aspects of the professional relationships in addition to taking the reflexive practices course in her MSW education.

### **The classroom: Teaching methods**

The participants emphasized their expectations that professors set the tone for the discussion about professional relationships within their classes, while describing the learning environment as being arbitrary. As Greyson (*two-year, year 2, CPPO Int*) elaborated:

I want to learn how to be professional but in a classroom it's very tough because in school it's theoretical. There's a tension there. You're going to graduate from this program no matter what. You can do really shoddy sorts of class work and still get a good grade. That doesn't mean you can go out and actually do social work or complete projects as a professional. So in terms of being a student, I don't see this process [MSW education] as being really professional, or teaching me how to be professional. I see it as sort of like, haphazard almost.

All participants echoed the ideas Greyson reported: That you will graduate no matter what, and the process of classroom learning does not facilitate knowledge of how to be professional. Other participants described aspects, which relate to this notion of "haphazard" learning. There was an expressed frustration that professors do not:

...call people out or call people in, or challenge them for their attitudes in class. Mostly they [professors] just don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but we don't learn without being challenged, especially about what it means to be professional (*Iris, PT Adv.S., Year 2, IFG*).

Angeline (*Adv. S., CPPO*) added:

...people are not being held accountable. And that again has been my experience throughout the whole program. I've seen instructors make faces at things that people say and they don't address it. How do you have a teachable moment if you don't address it?

Lastly, Rosina (*Adv. S., IFG*) stated:

My classes are basically taught by my peers, we learn from each other in this program, which is *so frustrating* to me. We all have experiences that can help one another learn, but our professors just let us discuss readings and issues without guiding us. I'm frustrated that I'm not learning from the professors' experience, their perspectives, their ideas. That's the whole point of learning. Why would I want to learn from people who are also there to learn? Seminar styled learning is really not helpful when trying to find out how to be professional.

These participants, Rosina, Angeline, Iris and Greyson, discussed wanting to be challenged, wanting accountability and, feeling frustrated by learning from their peers while wanting professors to be better facilitators within the classroom. Contributing to this notion of an arbitrary learning environment, other participants focused more on the mixed messages they perceived from faculty members and instructors.

Zoey (*two-year, year 2, IFG*) discussed receiving conflicting messages about professional relationships: "I'm not sure there's been any cohesion around that idea within the FSW at all. It's

like they assume we understand what a [professional] relationship is”. Jaimie (*two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*) stated:

At this point, and I'm halfway through the program, and I found that this topic was really not well discussed. There are pieces of it here and there, but... there's a lot of confusion and different messages from different courses haven't helped me make sense of it.

Further, participants described that relationships are “shrouded in an attitude that one just knows” (*Cate, Adv. S., AFS*) how to be in professional relationships. Participants perceive their instructors to believe that relationships are assumed knowledge – that social workers just know how to “do” them.

The participants perceived that learning about professional relationships is difficult because it is often taken-for-granted, is invisible or not discussed. It could be that these particular students are stuck in a particular framework of what education should look like. The participants seem quite passive as learners. If they want to know more about professional relationships, why not ask about them to make the concept clearer? This is especially pertinent considering the participants blamed their courses and professors for not teaching them about professional relationships, resulting in their “not knowing”. Regardless, participants believe that opportunities to explore professional relationships and find meaning in their new title as “professional social workers” are left unprocessed or unexplored within the classroom.

I introduce the finding of not knowing and blaming the classroom at the beginning of this chapter intentionally. Participants indicated they didn't know how to articulate the concept of professional relationships, and then they suggested their education was unhelpful in solidifying this concept; however, the emergent categories from this study suggested they do have an understanding, which arguably has been facilitated inside the classroom. There is a contradiction

between participants stating they haven't learned anything in their classroom but their dialogue throughout the interview suggests they have learned something about professional relationships.

### **Professional / Relationships: Conceptual Bifurcation**

All participants bifurcated the concept of professional relationships into separate areas of being professional and engaging in relationships as Zoey suggested earlier: "I think about two things. One is professionalism and the other is relationship". Participants did not discuss professional relationships as a unified concept. I will begin by focusing on what participants had to say about being professional, which include: aligning with the code of ethics, setting boundaries around self disclosures, and the value base underpinning social work practice.

#### **Professional means aligning with the code of ethics.**

Professionalism for me, involves codes of ethics, it involves working with people in a way that... aligns with that code of ethics. I think professionalism is also a box that you have to fit into like oh you're *not* being professional or *this* is professional. (Zoey, *Adv. S., IFG*)

Each participant described that professionalism requires a working knowledge of the Ontario College of Social Work and Social Service Workers (the regulatory body in the province of Ontario for social workers) values and code of ethics. Rosina (*Adv. S., IFG*) echoed Zoey by adding: "...that being professional is remaining in the code of ethics that we are given and the standards of conduct". Greyson, from the CPPO stream stated something similar. He said that "acting professional is guided by some sort of code of ethics which is not necessarily always the case with just informal relationships". Charles, also from the CPPO stream added, "the aspect that's relevant [to thinking about professional relationships] is the ethics and statement of practice". These participants described professionalism as a set of "actions" or something you are

“doing” which needs to fit within the values and codes of ethics. Zoey, in the quote above, observes that these actions fit a social worker into a category of either being, or not being, professional. What is particularly curious is that the participants were able to point towards the generalized expectations in the code of conduct, but the predicament for the participants arose when they tried to operationalize these codes of conduct into practice and connect professional actions to the values within the code of ethics.

### **Professionals and values.**

I think that [being professional] needs to be discussed within the [context] of social work values, even though such values are nebulous. It is my observation, having examined the practice statement and the ethics, that the values are liberal humanist values. I have to follow them strictly [to be a professional social worker], but they exclude other ways of understanding the world, and therefore have a particular narrow focus of what the profession should be. (*Charles, two-year, year 2, CPPO Integrated*)

Charles struggled with the notion of having to fit being professional into a liberal humanist value system and suggests that there are other ways of understanding the world beyond liberal humanism. Among several other participants, Charles discussed that one cannot use the designation of social worker without being registered. This requires one “to take the whole bundle [of values]. You can't be [a] registered [social worker] and take and leave some parts”. The discussion from all the participants problematized “whose values” inform the professional code of ethics. As an example, Gisela (*Adv. S., IFG*) stated:

If someone wants to commit suicide, why does that bother us? If we believe in autonomy, and that person is of sound mind, why does this bother us [social workers]? We need to think through why this bothers us because this is a reflection of our values.

Gisela introduces the difficulty she has with the intersection of professional and personal values. Professionally, we espouse autonomy, yet there is an internal contradiction between supporting autonomy while not supporting suicide. Participants echoed Gisela's sentiments and described their struggle to understand how professional and personal values are manifested in practice; the values espoused by the College provide the underpinning to our professionalism, however our personal values are connected to how we practice.

Participants also noted that agencies have an additional set of espoused values as an organization. Greyson (*two-year, year 2, CPPO*) stated:

My values usually win when there is a clash. I mean I can't speak from experience because I'm not part of the college or anything. I think I'm not so much worried about the governing body coming in and telling me to do things differently, or that I'm not professional enough, I think I'm more worried about an agency's idea of professionalism and values versus my personal values.

Interestingly, Greyson suggests that these three areas of personal, professional and organizational values are not always congruent; however, he was unable to articulate what agency's ideas of values or professionalism he was referring too. Do we align to the college first, then our organization? Or do we begin with ourselves? Greyson seems to presume that his own values can take precedence when experiencing a clash of values, which is contraindicated in the professional standards. It is concerning that Greyson, in his second last semester of his MSW program focused on policy feels his own values can be used to determine if he is "professional enough".

Sheila (*two-year, year 2, IFG Integrated*) adds her perspective around agency values and policies:

There were always these [agency] policies that wanted to dictate what professionalism was that didn't always jive with my values. Being fully client centered and coming up with some of the individualization of what a client needed, guided what I did.

Recognizing that there are other policies that were influencing my need to be professional, like standardized practice, I wasn't comfortable with that. I struggle with what happens when those standards re-victimize clients. Obviously [discovering how to be professional] is still a big work in progress.

Sheila suggests that policies may be rooted in a value base which supports standardized practice, but may not be aligned with her own value of being client centered and developing an individualized practice. As noted earlier, participants suggested they didn't learn about values and ethics within their courses; however, both Sheila and Greyson were in their final stages of their MSW program. They had taken courses on social work practice where ethics and values are part of the curriculum. Additionally, they had the opportunity to take a reflexive practice course to explore what they bring as individuals to their work. The participants seemed disconnected from what they learned in their coursework and were unsure how to use professional ethics to guide decision making within the field. Moreover, participants conflated the issue of values with several other concepts. Given the perception that there are conflicting value statements between individuals, agencies and the profession broadly, I wonder if this compounded the difficulty for participants to find meaning in *being* professional.

**Professionals have boundaries.**

The word that sticks out the most in my head in terms of being professional is just boundaries. I think there are all sorts of boundaries that are necessary. Separation between work and personal life, maybe being a little bit more closed or limited in sharing

personal details. Maintaining a distance between you and possibly a client so the work can be done in a systematic organized fashion. Yeah, mostly just protection of personal details. (*Magdalena, two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*)

Magdalena explains that boundaries ‘are necessary’ to act professionally, and that boundaries protect the personal information of the social worker. Magdalena echoed most participants’ belief that the ‘personal life’ should be maintained at a distance between the social worker and their client; however, Sheila (*two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*) points out those boundaries, “in many ways... protect you [the social worker] from hurt, and from associating with clients”. This distance is believed to allow for a “systematic and organized work plan” to take shape. According to Magdalena, the purpose of boundaries is to keep “myself safe, [they] put a veil or space between myself and another person”. This space between the social worker and the client reduces “vulnerability” for the social worker, whereby “making a mistake, making an error, [or] being accountable to the organization that I work in” is kept hidden from the client. Magdalena continues that professional boundaries are “a self-protective thing...[they’re] defensive [and allow a social worker to] retreat into that space of being really bounded and professional.”

Jelena (*two-year, year two, IFG*) elaborated on this idea by stating that boundaries:

...create a distance which I don't think is always good. But for me, particularly if I'm new in a situation or a career capacity, [boundaries] create a sense of safety, competency, I can fake it better...I'm going to present as professional, even if I am faking it.

Jelena elaborated that “being professional comes with all of that stuff, boundaries, distance, it is dehumanizing and all of that”. Zoey (*two-year, year 2 IFG*) and Nina (*Adv. S., CPPO*) added that boundaries “maintain distance” between clients and social workers by “keeping us separate”

which leaves the relationship at a “disadvantage”. Despite being in the later stages of their MSW education, Jelena, Zoey, and Nina continue to view boundaries as keeping the selfhood of the social worker distant or separate. This separation is curious since the code of ethics is intended to ensure client safety and their protection. A retreat from the values and ethical code is occurring when participants attempt to link behaviours to their practice, such as the enactment of boundaries.

Sheila (*two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*) shared her thoughts about professional boundaries:

I think it’s very easy to foster a professional or removed relationship with people who have less than you in terms of social capital and resources etc. because you've already been validated for your life. You've been successful, what you've done has been proper; so therefore professional. So I think it’s very easy in those cases to maintain a professional boundary. In many ways it protects you from hurt, from showing your own emotion and from associating with clients or whatever.

Most participants, like Sheila, describe personal feelings as being unprofessional, that to be professional requires a “removed relationship”. As Sheila stated, by acting professional, social workers protect themselves from being hurt. Interestingly, Sheila could not articulate what it was that caused the hurt, or how this “hurt” could be experienced. Embedded within Sheila’s comment is an assumption that being professional means you have been “proper” or “been validated for your life” resulting in having more “social capital and resources”. This positions the social worker to be extremely powerful in their interactions with clients who may be disadvantaged, marginalized or oppressed. This version of being professional is tethered to a social identity where power and class are linked to the notions of professionalism and in this

case, unquestioned privilege and classism. I will address these ideas further when discussing power later in these findings.

These participants have described how boundaries hide mistakes, create distance, create a sense of competency, are necessary to enact being professional, and protect the personal details of the social worker from becoming known to clients. They suggested that it is necessary to rely on rigid boundaries to maintain the performance of being professional by focusing on the use of self-disclosure.

I don't ever recall ever talking about myself. That's something that I don't ever do in my practice. I talk about certain things about my life but not too deep that it's too revealing.

That's not professional and my personal life is none of my clients' concern. (*Jaimie, two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*)

Participants discussed their struggle with feeling exposed by their self-disclosures with their clients. Most participants expressed that their personal lives and individual reactions to client content should be kept outside of the relationship they establish professionally, in an attempt to remain objective.

The compartmentalization of the personal life of a social worker needs to be considered in light of client benefit. Participants described that having a removed and professional persona “actually work[ed] to ensure the safety of the social worker” (*Zoey, two-year, year two, IFG*), but there was little consideration for the impact on, and perceptions of, the client. Participants described some frustration with regard to finding a balance between maintaining professionalism and having boundaries on one hand, while on the other hand, having the ability to use self-disclosure or the relationship itself as a mechanism for client change. Jelena (*two-year, year two, IFG*) discussed a story where she couldn't help but to disclose her feelings and while the result

for the client was positive, she felt quite vulnerable and scared that her reaction was unprofessional.

We had one session together and in our second session he came in and disclosed that one of his peers had committed suicide two or three days ago. That really shook me. I reacted authentically in that I was shocked. I expressed my condolences in a way that was authentic, in a way that I had not been with that client [before]. I hadn't felt that exposed with my clients before. I was really self-conscious about it. I went to supervision. The session was tape-recorded. I was so nervous at this authentic use of self was harmful because I was really new with this client and also new at being in a therapist role. I was worried I was unprofessional. However, I received feedback and I also listened to the tape, I was really terrified but I think it was, for me, the best reaction that I could have provided that client in the moment. I can't think of a response inserted there that was from a manual that really would have conveyed that this was really shocking and horrible. I was terrified that by me showing that I was shaken by it that the client would feel that I wasn't prepared to support him as well. That if I was shaken then I was weak or disarmed and that we were both in this together and that meant, who has the life preserver?

Jelena described using her self-disclosure, which she worried was unsupportive, demonstrated weakness by being “shaken” by her client’s experience and could be viewed as unprofessional. Jelena, like most other participants, articulated that she didn’t know much about the professional relationship. This quote suggests that she has some understanding that authentic responses and the use of self-disclosure are required to engage relationally; however, she was unable to clarify how this connects with professionalism or boundaries.

The pattern of fear around showing authentic responses to clients and fear of causing harm to clients through a real emotional reaction were common throughout the data. As Gisela (*Adv. S., IFG*) noted, “We come in feeling like we are an imposter. The idea that by the time we are done our degree we won’t make any mistakes is not realistic, yet that’s the pressure we feel. What if my emotional reactions cause harm? What do I do then?” Jelena’s story, Gisela’s comments, and the responses of most participants suggest a struggle with what it means to be professional when our own self-disclosures or reactions become involved; however, this struggle is connected to the participants’ discomfort with their feeling of unpreparedness to assume the role of a “professional social worker”. There is another retreat happening here for the participants, this time a retreat from the content of their reflexive practice course which deals explicitly with these issues.

Participants use the language of “fitting into a box”, or entering a “veiled space” that is separate from that of their clients. This conveys the way they understand the protection that the bounded behaviours of professionalism offer them. Discussions about how boundaries are important for clients were largely absent from the data; instead participants focused on how boundaries are protective for the social worker. What the participants want to protect is their self, which comprises their personal information (self-disclosures), beginners’ incompetence (“mistakes”) and their assumptions about what a professional persona constitutes. The question then emerges: how do we learn this professionalism? Where do participants learn which aspects of our self are to be kept distant from our clients?

Reflecting on what participants had to say, I notice an antilogy between the participants’ stated “not knowing” about professional relationships, yet they were able to articulate that being professional requires boundaries, an alignment with the code of ethics and standards of practice,

and an adherence with the values espoused by the regulatory college. The participants suggested their classrooms did not do much to facilitate this understanding; however, they discussed concepts, which are part of the curriculum. I will now elaborate on the category of relationships, the other side of the bifurcated term.

### **Relationships: Elusive Definitions**

Participants experienced difficulty when attempting to define what a relationship is for social work professionals. Magdalena (two year, year two, IFG integrated) stated:

Maybe [relationships are] one of those post-modern things that you can't quantify. You could define it in a million different ways but that's why I think it's missing from the literature because it is simply impossible and none of the definitions are exhaustive so what's the point? I mean there is a point of trying to define it for yourself, but trying to define it for someone else is not. Like how can you advise people on how to best embody professional relationships when you can't even define it yourself?

Magdalena's statement echoed most participants who acknowledged they could not define relationships for social work. Magdalena even suggested that the definition is missing from the literature, which is concerning as the literature is replete with relational concepts. Again, there is evidence that the participants are not integrating their learning from their course work. At this point in her MSW education, Magdalena had been exposed to several courses where the relationship is part of the curriculum: Social work practice with individuals and reflexive practices are two courses that come to mind. Additionally, Magdalena has also completed one full placement. Magdalena seems frustrated by not finding a common definition of relationships, or one that seems to fit within her own understanding.

Part of the difficulty, perhaps, in finding a common definition, is that “one definition does not adequately capture the breadth of social work practices” (*Greyson, two-year, year two, CPPO*). Rosina (*Adv. S., IFG*) stated, “[Relationships] look different in different settings”, so the environment, purpose and mandate where one practices become relevant when considering the professional relationship. Where Magdalena explains her not knowing by saying there are no definitions, Greyson and Rosina exhibit a more advanced understanding of the definitions of relationships, but recognize that it is a very complex and context-dependent construct.

Interestingly, most participants described one-on-one counselling as the occupational space where relationships are most relevant, despite statements about social work being a relationally based profession more broadly. Charles (*two-year, year two, CPPO Int*), as an exception to viewing relationships as only applicable to counselling, added his experiences as a social work student which focused on Community, Policy, Planning and Organization within his MSW education. He noted:

I think there's this false dichotomy that CPPO is non-clinical and away from the relationships. But it's not. I'm doing my placement at [a community based research institute] and it's all about community engagement and building relationships. Ultimately that does go down to that one individual... When I think about policy makers it's having that input from the end users and from the target audience. So I think, yes, there is that relationship, it's all relational. But what does that mean? I don't think I know.

Although Charles rejects the “false dichotomy” between clinical social work and community or policy development, he does see a difference: Social workers in the latter two fields use their relationships with individuals to gather input about broader issues. He describes relationships from a CPPO perspective but he doesn't seem to notice that he's describing a difference when

compared to clinically based social work practice. Additionally, despite describing the difference, he is unable to make meaning of relationships. This is another example of not yet integrating the learning regarding professional relationships.

Zoey (*two-year, year two, IFG*) elaborated on the divide between clinical and non-clinical social work and suggested the difficulty in finding meaning stems from inconsistent messages from her courses and professors. Zoey stated:

I feel like we are getting a variety of messages within the faculty. Also, that these messages can be applied differently when we are talking about one on one relationships in a therapeutic framework versus a larger agency umbrella where you're doing more community development work.

Here, Zoey complained that the messages she has received within the faculty are diverse and complicate her understanding of what relationships are about, particularly when we focus on different types of social work practice. Zoey, like Charles, draws the distinction between clinical social work practice and community development work noting there are differences with regards to how the professional relationship is utilized in clinical versus community or policy fields of practice. They perceive that instructors provide varied messages regarding relationships, making it difficult to find clarity in the concept as it applies to various practice domains.

Participants discussed varied messages from professors, which exacerbate the difficulty in attempting to define and apply relational principles to their practices. Further, participants perceive that instructors are “shrouded in an attitude that one just knows” (*Cate, Adv. S., AFS*) how to be in professional relationships.

Participants criticize their educators for not providing clarity regarding relationships. They do not seem able to integrate their learning to date, to explore the meaning of professional

relationships within varying practice contexts, or to use their own discussions, readings, and placements as an opportunity to integrate the concepts they are indeed learning about.

Participants couldn't articulate what a definition of relationships should be; however, some were able to articulate a difference between social work practices that are more clinical versus social work which is more community or policy based.

Grace (*two year, year two, CPPO Integrated*) provided a clue as to why it is difficult to define a relationship:

Well, I think I'm still trying to determine what professional relationships are, that's why I'm here (in the research interview). I have been reflecting and thinking about that. It's definitely something, which I think everyone who is new to the field is facing. It's a very different relationship from friendship relationship. So in the big scope of things, the professional relationship, this is where you conduct yourself while at work and getting your work done and getting things, you know. You work with a client, that's a relationship. But it's more important to be professional. So in the professional relationship we have to contain their emotions without kind of, getting into your own emotions, or projecting your own emotions.

Grace acknowledged that determining what professional relationships are is a challenge and suggested that "its more important to be professional," which clearly illustrates the bifurcation of the concept of professional relationships. By placing the emphasis on being professional, because that is "more" important, the relationship is left with the designation of being "less" important. Grace also suggests that to be professional we should withhold our own emotions and projections. This bifurcation, the emphasis on being professional, and the removal of the emotional aspects of social workers seem to make it challenging to grasp how relationships are

ultimately useful for professionals. It is interesting that Grace talked about the containment of client emotions and an awareness of social worker emotions and projections, as these are traditionally clinical, therapeutic concepts. Grace, coming from the CPPO stream, doesn't seem to have developed her perspective as to what relationships are for community workers or policy developers.

### **Relational skills.**

Participants were asked directly to articulate their ideas or understandings regarding relational skills. Initially, they had trouble articulating particular skills similar to their struggle to articulate professionalism; however, they were able to offer experiences that they understood as reflecting relationship skills. The relational skills noted by participants included building a rapport with clients and the use of reflexive practices.

### ***Building rapport.***

Participants suggested that rapport building is the major skill involved in being relational with clients. Participants who studied within the IFG stream discussed the common factor literature to support rapport building.

I think the ability to talk about common factors; we did in one of my classes [is relevant]. This ability that there are certain things in the therapeutic alliance that are essential to there being a positive outcome in the therapeutic process. So in terms of ability to build rapport, but I don't remember what the common factors are. But this idea that there is a skill set in a way that perhaps for some are more innate than for others, I think it could be considered a skill set that can be practiced and honed. But the professional relationship as a skill set, yeah, I think that comes with practice. I think it comes with working with different clients. Like if you are working in a homogenous environment, I mean nobody

is really homogenous per se, but then you were to be put into a completely different environment it would be really hard to have a relationship with people if you didn't know how to build that rapport. (*Jelena, two-year, year two, IFG*)

There are several interesting concepts that Jelena highlighted, which were echoed by other IFG participants: First, the knowledge that common factors were relevant, yet a limited ability to remember what common factors are about. This pattern of being able to name major concepts with the inability to flesh out the ideas or articulate how to put those concepts into practice was common throughout the discussions with participants. As another example, Rosina (*Adv. S., IFG*) noted that “if you have a very strong developed rapport and a strong engagement... it might be hurtful for the client. They start living your vision. It’s not what they need, but they’re dependent”. Here, Rosina adds that rapport building could lead to client dependency on the social worker. Rosina seems unaware that she is speaking of ethics and boundaries, which mitigate potential dependencies, not about rapport. Additional examples of naming concepts but not fleshing out the ideas were present when participants said they didn’t know what professional relationships were about.

Second, Jelena and Rosina’s statements have a clinical focus where therapeutic alliance and rapport building are central to positive outcomes in therapy. These participants do not consider other skills where relationship building may be useful in social work beyond clinical practice. There is an absence in the data regarding relational skills outside of clinical social work practice, largely due to participants being unable to articulate what skills are relational. When asked about these skills, Nina (*Adv. S., CPPO*) echoed other CPPO participants and stated: “I believe there are relational skills, but I couldn’t tell you what they are. Like, just talk to people?”

Listen to them? I don't think I know what these skills are or even if they are applicable to non-clinical social work".

***Reflexivity.***

Participants discussed how "reflexive practices" could lead to a stronger ability to relate to clients and become more aware of what theory calls the intersubjective space of social work practices; that is, the intersection of the worker and the client in any given space. Participants described that knowing yourself, or being reflexive, is necessary in "order to do" the work of social work.

You have to, in order to do this work; you have to be working on your self. You have to work on your own self-reflections and self-awareness. Part of being good at relating to people is knowing yourself and understanding how you're getting in the way of things, or helping things along. It's about having reflexive practices. (*Gisela, Adv. S. IFG*)

What is interesting about Giesela's quote is the conflation of the use of self with reflexivity.

Gisela seems to think reflexive practices are the same process as the traditional use of self. One of the discoveries within the responses of participants is that of theoretical drifting; whereby concepts such as reflexivity are not fully understood or integrated, or are conflated with other theories. It is important to note that all participants except year one students had taken a course focusing on reflexivity or were currently enrolled in that course at the time of the research interview. This further highlights the tension between what participants are being taught in their course work and their capacity to articulate that learning in a way that shows integration of the concepts taught. Reflexivity, as an example, includes the exploration of power, social identities or the application of particular forms of knowledge; however, the participants either drop or skim over the notions of power and identity, reducing reflexivity to a process that "points out your

blind spots” (*Grace, two-year, year two, CPPO Integrated*). As Angeline (*Adv. S., CPPO*) elaborated:

You have to be reflexive, you have to be able to regulate your emotions and all of those things that we want clients to do... So that when you're in that relationship where you do have all the power and when your intent is to help the person meet their own needs, you can't become part of the problem. What is my history? What is my life? What are my values from that? What am I bringing into this relationship? Who am I as a person? What are my beliefs? What are my judgments? What are the triggers that I have?

Angeline is able to articulate that reflexivity has something to do with power, but the role of power is dropped in the questions posed by Angeline regarding history, judgement and personhood. Also, Angeline equates being reflexive with being able to regulate your emotions. This is a misunderstanding of the role emotions play within reflexive practices. Reflexivity is not about the regulation of social worker's emotion, but utilizing emotional responses to deepen the understanding between a client and social worker.

The participants perceive that reflexivity is a necessary ingredient to relational practices, as knowing yourself helps highlight your biases and assumptions. Iris (*Pt. Adv. S., Year 2, IFG*) stated:

[Being uncomfortable] is a good indicator that I'm going into an area that is challenging some assumptions that I've had and maybe some core beliefs. When stuff is easy that usually means we are not really thinking about it. When something gets uncomfortable there's an underlying belief or assumption there. That's how I know I need to step back and think about myself. But that makes me vulnerable. I don't think most of my classmates like being vulnerable – it's like they are ashamed for being human.

The participants echoed Iris' comment and noted that to be reflexive "requires vulnerability" on the social worker's part. By exploring self, one may discover some areas where biases, assumptions or attitudes exist which may be counterintuitive to the practices and values espoused by the field of Social Work or leave the social worker feeling uncomfortable. It is the exploration of underlying beliefs or assumptions that participants believe is useful when thinking reflexively about their self and their practice. Participants noted if their beliefs or assumptions are different from those of clients, there is the potential to misuse power or become oppressive towards clients.

Many participants noted that reflexivity becomes an especially difficult challenge as they "are trying to learn how to practice, we are being taught how to be critically aware, and then we have to account for ourselves on top of it all. There are so many things to learn. It's overwhelming" (*Sheila, 2 yr, year 2, IFG Int.*). If relationally based practices require reflexive awareness of self, accounting for that self would be considered necessary and professional, yet, Sheila seems to suggest that "learning how to practice" is something separate from being critically aware and accounting for her self.

Participants within the CPPO stream noted that engaging in community work is relational; yet, those with a particular interest in developing policy felt disconnected from reflexive practices, as they "don't engage directly with clients" (*Nina, Adv. S., CPPO*). Even when prompted to consider that policies eventually filter down to impact individuals, reflexivity was not viewed as being central to policy-based social work practice. Moreover, the potential to explore one's own social location and privilege, values and assumptions and how they inform policy making are absent from the data.

AFS students did not discuss the need for “reflexivity” or the “use of self” through their discussions. Perhaps, there is a cultural difference with their orientation to the role of being a helper, where reflexive practices are not something to be done, but are practices which are lived. As Cate (*Adv. S., AFS*) stated,

“The consciousness of the Aboriginal worldview is particularly relevant as we develop a functional and caring social work rooted in values, the importance and acknowledgement of extended family, collective rights, sharing, the acceptance of diversity, mutual respect, and the shared responsibility for the well-being of all members of society”.

Indigenous approaches acknowledge that self is wholistic and interconnected with everything. The notion of reflexive awareness is that it is an ongoing process like breathing and everything done or said is considered to impact others. This idea is directly akin to reflexivity.

### **Relationships are ‘power-full’.**

Initially, participants were asked “Can you tell me what theories, concept, principles or values you have been learning about that contribute to your understanding of the professional relationship?” They were provided with the following prompts to consider: “Power, self-reflection, client-centered work, empowerment, and theories such as counter/transference, skills such as self disclosure, in addition to other examples”. Interestingly, participants spoke mostly about power and didn’t acknowledge the other concepts.

Whatever you're doing as a social worker, there's power there. (*AnnMarie, two-year, year one, CPPO Integrated*)

There is a power imbalance in the relationship between a client and a social worker.

(*Gisela, Adv. S., IFG*)

I feel like the social work relationship, regardless of where you are, like what your role ends up being; whether you're a counsellor, or neighbourhood support worker, or outreach worker, power is present there. (*Cate, Adv. S., AFS*)

Once you get that higher level, working in those relationships that maybe more credentialed, like having an MSW. There is more power in there. (*Greyson, two-year, year two, CPPO*)

Participants described the need to consider the power differential and how “things might come across” (*Jaimie, two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*), or “acknowledge the power we have” (*Iris, PT., Adv. S., Year two, IFG*). When asked to elaborate, they were unable to. Charles (*two-year, year two, CPPO Integrated*) reported:

In many of the discussions in classes there's always a concern about power. I think we are not well grounded on why we are sensitive to power and people just quote Foucault, and to me, people misunderstand what Foucault is talking about and what power is.

Charles, when discussing people's misunderstanding, was referring to the fact that power “is always going to be part of relationships; it doesn't have to be destructive. It's like all we know how to do is acknowledge power.” Angeline (*Adv. S., CPPO*) echoed this sentiment:

I think it would be great to be more explicit about [power]. From what I can tell, we talk about power a whole lot here at the building [the Faculty of Social Work]. We talk about it pretty vaguely; we talk about it in terms of acknowledging it, period. There's never anything done with that acknowledgement from what I can tell at this point. Or at least acknowledge the fact that sometimes you can't do anything about it.

Jaimie (*two-year, year two, IFG Integrated*) added:

I really have valued the instructors, profs and guest speakers who come in and make the theory really come to life, but that hasn't happened frequently. Usually, power is simply acknowledged. Rarely do they help you understand how power manifested in their practice, perhaps how they mishandled it or have learned a different way of being with clients due to making mistakes. We don't need to just learn to think critically, we need to learn how to *do* social work practice. It feels like we are just learning little bits, getting an overview. It's like I missed some class or lecture where they explained power and professionalism – I'm supposed to just know it I guess.

Participants perceived that the concept of power is taken-for-granted in their classrooms. It is curious that when participants were asked directly about certain concepts like power, professional relationships, even reflexivity, their default response is to point back to their classrooms as if it is their professors who are to blame for their perceived not knowing.

Regarding power, participants were unable to clearly articulate how the concept of power relates to the conceptualization of professional relationships. Most participants echoed Jaime's sentiments and wondered if learning was enhanced with concrete linkages to practice, there would be fewer assumptions being made regarding power and professionalism. There is also an underlying assumption here that professors are responsible for pushing the learning edge of their students, rather than students taking an active role in their own education.

Charles (*two-year, year two, CPPO Integrated*) was the only participant to mention Foucault; however, he mentions Foucault as though he is the only theorist who discusses power or as though the Faculty of Social Work only utilizes Foucauldian ideas of power. Participants did not ground their discussions about power within anti-oppressive practices, which is a significant omission since all students in their first term take a course focused on diversity,

marginalization and oppression. This omission and the lack of grounding conversations about power into practice does align with the critiques of AOP as being a conceptual and political approach as opposed to a model of practice.

The difficulty participants experienced in extending their discussion of power beyond simple acknowledgement was unexpected, yet it echoed the difficulty participants had throughout the study: They were able to name concepts, but struggled significantly with expanding on their thoughts or applying concepts to practice. Moreover, participants had a difficult time linking concepts learned in the classroom, such as power, to being professional. They described feeling frustrated that their graduate level education was comprised of learning more from one another in a seminar style class than learning from their professors and instructors. I will now turn to the final category that emerged in the data: relationship teaches relationship.

### **Relationship Teaches Relationship**

Participants suggested some areas that contributed to their learning about professional relationships: professor's experience, placement mentorship, and their own experiences as a client. As I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, participants suggested that their classrooms were not conducive to their learning about professional relationships as the definition is taken-for-granted, messages from professors vary leaving students with incongruent messages, and their perception that their classes are largely taught by their peers.

Participants noted that learning about being relational is largely derived from relationships with mentors: relationship teaches relationship. Professors, field instructors, and personal experiences with helpers all were discussed as fostering learning about professional relationships. Participants discussed how explicit examples from instructors are helpful in

illustrating professional decision making and mentorship from field instructors facilitate specific knowledge as it relates to various social work occupations. Additionally, some participants reflected on their own experiences with helpers and considered how those helpers embodied professionalism in light of the theories and practices the participants were learning throughout their MSW education.

**Professor experience.**

Participants discussed the value in learning from their professors' experiences in the field; however, they described these learning opportunities to be rare within their education. As AnnMarie (*two-year, year one, CPPO Integrated*) elaborated:

The experience they [professors] bring and scenarios they've been part of - that's their self-disclosure of their own scenarios. Being able to bring that experience in and make you think, ok well what would I do in this situation? Is it the same? Is it different? We had one guest lecture provide a critical scenario of something relational that happened to them in their workplace and they asked, what would you do? And people said, well I wouldn't tell my supervisor, and others said, I would tell them right away. At the end, she said, no it's clear-cut, in this situation you have to tell your supervisor. Everyone was like, oh ok. So even having that conversation where something is clear-cut and seeing how many different ideas there are makes you think, ok. I need to think about this in advance as well.

Nina (*Adv. S., CPPO*) added:

I learn through hearing about their experiences. Hearing about mistakes. Hearing about their own experiences when professionalism, ethics or boundary busting was an issue. I think it's all well and good to hear lectures about ethics to our class and that's really

important, but what is professionalism, what is the relationship? I think it would be nice for them to address their own issues of professionalism or subjectivities by going into it and mistakes that they've made, but they never seem to do that in class.

These participants described that hearing about professor's work experience are helpful when trying to understand how certain theories or practices manifest in the field; however, participants expressed they didn't receive a great deal of these relational examples from their professors, as much of their program is driven by learning from "one another", which echoes the earlier finding where teaching methods are perceived to be not conducive to their learning. One perception as to why there is not enough from professors is that professors don't do enough teaching. As Gisela (*Adv. S., IFG*) stated, "We learn too much from one another in this program. It's all self-taught and discussion based. We don't often get an opportunity to hear from our professors in a meaningful way." Gisela echoed Nina's earlier perception that learning is primarily peer driven. Participants discussed their desire for learning about relationships; however, the perceived sparseness of examples in the classroom leads to an unarticulated definition of relationships for professional practice. They indicate wanting to learn from their professors' experiences and note in particular, mistakes that their professors have made. It is curious that the participants focused on mistakes in order to learn about relationships instead of success stories.

Magdalena (*two-year, year 2, IFG Integrated*) elaborated on the value of hearing about mistakes. She stated:

The impression from our professors is that by the time you get your degree you're not going to make any mistakes. Or you're going into practicum in January and we don't make mistakes as faculty so you'll be fine. That just isn't true. It isn't real. Especially early on, making mistakes is actually very good for you because it teaches you what not

to do. If you can learn that quickly that's a good thing. I think hearing people's stories of failure, we are all human as I said before, we are fallible. To show that you can make a big mistake but know that everyone is ok, we learn from this and this is what you should try this next time. I think it takes some of the pressure off of feeling like you need to be perfect. I mean, definitely we strive for competency, to be professional. But part of striving for that competency is learning from mistakes.

I am curious about why professors and instructors are perceived not to discuss their own mistakes and learning opportunities. Are these “mistakes” deemed unprofessional and therefore become compartmentalized? Or are professors utilizing case examples and their own experiences but students are not absorbing or integrating the information? I also wonder if this perception by the participants connects to their difficulty with vulnerability as noted earlier. Vulnerability may lead to mistakes, and if social workers “don’t make mistakes” as the participants suggest, there may be little room to explore how vulnerability, and mistakes, link to the professional relationship.

Magdalena’s statement leads me to wonder if the bifurcation of the term professional relationship also contributes to this idea that professionals do not make mistakes. If a social worker does make a mistake, are they therefore unprofessional? This “mistake” making seems disconnected from professionalism, perhaps leaving mistakes to the relational aspects of the bifurcated term. This notion that mistake making is unprofessional seems to be a belief perpetuated by the perception that professors do not talk about mistakes they have made.

Keeping the selfhood of the social worker bounded and hidden from the client was described as being professional; however, this hidden selfhood doesn’t seem to allow for an integration of how the social worker can enhance the relationship. Magdalena even links the

ideas of competency to being professional, but doesn't suggest that you can have competencies in being relational, or having a professional relationship. This is another example of how the bifurcation of the term professional relationships seems to fail participants' ability to integrate the concept into their practice.

Regarding their learning, Magdalena, Nina, Gina and AnnMarie expressed wanting more dialogue about mistakes, professionalism, and relationships from their professors. Perhaps these examples would lead to a better understanding of how professional relationships appear in the field, particularly if a mistake is made. By highlighting that professionals do make mistakes, professors may help students to alleviate the pressure to be "perfect" professionals, as Magdalena suggested.

#### **Placement supervisors.**

Participants also discussed learning from field instructors and placement supervisors in addition to their professors.

I learned a lot about relationships through placement. Yeah, it was through the experience and talking through things with my supervisor. She made those connections for me. She had such a fascinating perspective and so many different experiences to draw from. I couldn't learn about relationships just from a book or a lecture. I had to really work hard to understand how to have a relationship with clients, and I needed my placement supervisor to help me with that (*Iris, PT Adv. S., Year 2, IFG*).

Participants discussed the value of having placement supervisors assist in their understanding of relationships in practice. It was noted that placement supervisors, or field instructors, are helpful to participants as they have the opportunity to engage about specific practice interventions as they relate to a particular job. As Angeline (*Adv. S., CPPO*) stated, "There's value in seeing other

professionals at work and thinking what did I or did I not like about that and why”? Participants used their field placements to increase their understanding of how they function within a given role in the field. For some, the learning curve is quite large, especially if their practicum is in a role they have not been in before.

Most participants described their placement as an environment to “...[learn] a new role... it was hard but eventually I kind of like, came to terms with the challenge” (*Grace, two-year, year 2, CPPO Integrated*). Grace explained that she had worked much of her career in “community-based support and [my] practicum was in a counselling agency” providing one-to-one psychotherapy. Learning what it meant to be professional in this practicum setting was “starkly different from what being professional meant in community-based work”. Grace often looked to her field supervisor to help navigate how professional relationships are utilized within counselling interventions as opposed to a community based interventions. The experience Grace captured was echoed by most of the participants. They expressed a learning curve while acquiring knowledge about “how” to do certain occupations, how to become a counsellor, a case manager, a child protection worker, a policy developer, or a social work researcher, but felt that “relationships mean something different as a clinician versus a case manager” (*Jelena, two year-, year 2, IFG*). Participants did not articulate those differences and when probed to elaborate, they could not offer a speculation as to how relationships might be different in various occupational settings.

The various contexts where social work is practiced seem to be an issue when trying to apply relational concepts to practice. The participants have pointed in several ways, as evidenced by the data, that “clinical” social work is different from “policy” or “community based social work” when it comes to understanding relationships. Instead, they choose to seek opportunities

in their practicum experience to learn the relevance of relationships within that particular occupational role, as opposed to social work in its entirety.

**Being a client.**

While placement fostered learning about relationships, those participants who had been a client in a social work relationship noted that their own therapeutic process or the experience of being a client contributed to their own learning.

You have to go in there and experience being on the other side of the chair. Not just acknowledge that it could be really hard to be on the other side of the chair, but you have to do it. Having an understanding of that goes beyond [intellectualization]. I think we talk a lot about how people should have an understanding of social location and self-awareness to build relationships with clients, but I'm not convinced that the way we do it in the program really breeds that for everyone. It's been my general experience in terms of what I've kind of witnessed happening. I honestly think the program should make everyone go to therapy. The program doesn't need to know what's going on but they need a signed letter saying I have been in a therapeutic process for myself (*Angeline, Adv. S., CPPO*).

Participants discussed one final component which contributed to their learning – having utilized social work services to enhance their self-knowledge while also addressing a variety of concerns as clients. Several participants echoed the benefit of doing one's own work, and interestingly this idea spanned the streams of the MSW program. Grace (*two-year, year two, CPPO Int*) stated, "I did my personal therapy long ago. I do believe it's incredibly important to know how to be professional and relational". Cate (*Adv. St., AFS*) said: "I've learned so many different approaches because I have been in the user seat. So it's a learning experience, it's a

huge learning experience besides from the fact that it's helping me process and be more self-reflective, I'm also learning what it means to be connected to a professional." Participants reflected how they have been supported in a plethora of ways prior to their MSW education.

Greyson (*two-year, year two CPPO*) added:

There was a counsellor at my rehab. He's seen me all four times I was admitted. He's seen me progress. Maybe because we had that history it certainly helped me. But there was this time when he made this comment. 'Hey, I've seen you come a long way, and I think whatever you needed to get out of drugs it worked. But now you don't need them. You're there.' It was kind of this weird comment but it helped me to realize that I'm self-actualizing. But it was because of my relationship with him that I could see that. I try to do that now for my clients. So that was really good.

Some, like Greyson, discussed in-patient treatment for addiction and mental health disorders; others noted attending employee assistance programs to discuss occupational or life stressors, while others attended counselling/psychotherapy for self-development. In any capacity, the participants indicated that their own therapeutic process had been useful in modeling for them the relational skills that they desire to embody as professional social workers themselves. They describe being better equipped to integrate relational learning from their own process alongside the lessons learned on placement, with theories and examples provided in class.

These participants also describe how their experiences as clients provided insight into theoretical and conceptual ideas from the classroom to better understand the role and experience of the client within professional relationships. This is unique within the findings in that it was the first time that the participants were able to describe the relationship from a client's perspective, instead of being confined to the perspective of the social worker. Despite articulating that their

own experiences as clients helped to provide insight into professional relationships, the participants continued to be unable to expand on what this knowledge was in concrete and practical terms.

### **Chapter Summary**

I began this chapter by highlighting the finding that participants said they didn't know much about professional relationships, yet paradoxically, they were able to dialogue about boundaries, the code of ethics, values, building rapport, power, and reflexivity. These findings stand in contrast to their stated not knowing. Moreover, the bifurcation of professional and relationship is a manifestation of participants' inability to integrate these concepts. Participants seem to not understand how professional and relational work together. By bifurcating the term, they seem to think there are two separate domains: one leaves you vulnerable (relationship) while the other leaves you in control (professional). It is curious that the participants did not consider how power links to their professional practice. Participants also struggled to consider how power, ethics or social identities are relevant to reflexive practices. These topics are replete throughout the MSW curriculum, yet, something seems to prevent these participants from being able to integrate what they have read and discussed in class into their understand of professional social work practice.

The whirlwind of entering MSW education seems to be part of the problem. Participants indicated they were hoping to learn "what to do when..." by the completion of their MSW; however, there is a gap between the learning, integration and application of the many theoretical concepts to practice. The difficulty with integration and application seems further compounded by varied and vastly different practice occupations. What does it mean for the field if you can do "shoddy work and still get a good grade" and no matter what, "you will graduate from the

program?” How do we account for learning within such a framework? What does this imply for professionals who are graduating? What are the ramifications on the client/social worker relationship if we leave the definition of professional behaviour to those who are still learning about the profession? I will now focus on the discussion of these findings in the next chapter.

## **Discussion**

This study asked the question: What does the concept of professional relationships mean to MSW students? Through individual interviews, this qualitative study utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodology which revealed students perceived they did not know what professional relationships were about. Moreover they blamed their “not knowing” on their classroom experiences. Participants also bifurcated the concept into professional and relationship making it difficult to see how the two aspects fit together. I would like to begin the discussion with the tensions that I noted in the findings, particularly between participants’ stated “not knowing” about the concept of professional relationships and their capacity to dialogue about these concepts. I will then contextualize and problematize the neo-liberal learning environment where social work education is currently positioned, and consider how threshold theory may assist educators to understand how it is that students struggle with certain concepts.

### **Emerging Concepts**

Participants in this study were in various stages within their MSW education. Some were in their first semester; others were in their second year of the MSW program. The similarities across the participant group regarding the perceived lack of information about professional relationship is surprising, as one would assume that the further along in their education they were, the greater the understanding there would be in terms of the concept of professional relationships. The findings suggest that these participants finish their MSW education without a meaningful conceptualization of professional relationship. Students in the second year of the two year program had already completed one placement and a year’s worth of course work at the time of the research interview, and their responses do not suggest any more clarity or meaning

than first year students who were three months into their program at the time of the research interview.

Attempts to find meaning in the concept of professional relationship were difficult for the participants who perceive an absence of discussion within the classroom. Moreover, participants struggled with the integration of theories being taught regarding professional relationships and bifurcated the concept into two distinct concepts, whereby professionalism and relational practice were separated from one another. This left the “professional” isolated from the relational aspects of the social work encounter, resulting in a view of professionalism that omits relationship building as a central skill for practice. Moreover, the isolation of the relational aspects prevented participants from critical reflection on their contributions to the social work encounter, and unable to unpack the role of power within relationships. It is problematic that students bifurcate the concept of professional relationships and are unable to understand what it means to be professional, particularly since an MSW is considered a professional degree through which students learn skills that are necessary to become a registered social worker. In addition, since relationality is embedded in definitions of social work practice and value statements by national and international social work organizations, it is worrisome that participants’ feel this concept is not adequately addressed through their education.

Ultimately, the meaning of professional relationships for participants was left unarticulated: Participants were able to suggest that professional relationships were important, but also indicated they were difficult to understand due to what participants perceived to be mixed messages received from their faculty. I was surprised at how much blame participants placed onto their education for their perceived not-knowing. For the purposes of this discussion,

I believe the bifurcation of professional relationships is partially the result of the context where the participants find themselves learning and working.

### **Context: Neoliberalism & Competency Based Education**

The effect of the neoliberal environment has implications for professional relationships through new managerialism where regulatory procedures and auditing have deep ties to neoliberal thinking and market economics (Bradley et al., 2010; Harlow, 2004; Kolthoff et al., 2007). This managerialism has resulted in an increase of both direct and indirect methods of control, with a particular emphasis on boosting productivity and profit while reducing cost (Macalpine & Marsh, 2008), which has resulted in non-profit and government funded agencies wanting to sustain funding; however, social work professionals are then tied to accountability and to demonstrate that their practices are effective. Neoliberalist funding formulas have demanded that social workers prove their interventions are helpful, and those interventions should be productive – meaning work with as many clients as possible to facilitate change and use minimal resources to achieve the change sought out by the clients.

As I acknowledged in the literature review, practice environments have become focused on increased regulation, audits, service outputs (rather than user outcomes), which several authors have suggested remove the relational components of practice (Bradley et al., 2010; Harlow, 2004; Kolthoff et al., 2007). Despite the amount of research supporting the importance of professional relationships as the foundation for relational practice (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967; Fuertes et al., 2007; Goldstein et al., 2009; Maiter et al., 2006; Rogers, 1957; Roter, 2000; Rosser & Kasperski, 2001; Ruch et al., 2010; Sprenkle, Davis & Lebow, 2009; Waterhouse & McGhee, 2009), neoliberalism forces the relational aspects of the work to become unimportant by focusing practice on outcomes, audits and service outputs (Bradley et al., 2010; Munro,

2004). Social workers are expected to focus on defensible decisions rather than ‘right’ decisions (Parton, 1998). Often, these defensible decisions take the form of standardization promoting accountability, but they can also lead to “minimum acceptable standards, increased administration and reduced educational content. As a result, employers believe that social workers no longer need to have specific skills in therapeutic or specialized social work interventions” (Spolander et al., 2014, p. 307).

Many of the theorists mentioned identify relational practices as being a central skill for social workers. What happens then, if these skills are no longer deemed necessary within neoliberal thinking? Neoliberalism has been criticized for weakening the profession as many tasks “previously undertaken by social workers are now undertaken by unqualified workers or other professionals” (Spolander et al., 2014, p. 307), because of the drive for efficiency and modernization espoused by neoliberalism. Moreover, it has been argued that social workers are becoming “deskilled” administrators of a neo-liberal agenda, primarily concerned with providing risk assessment and amelioration (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Pollack, 2010; Webb, 2006). If the profession itself is weakened by the neoliberal state, it is no wonder that the student participants in this study struggle with the concept of professional relationships. I observed that participants had a difficult time articulating relational skills beyond rapport building. The absences from participant thinking about relational skills were noticeable. I believe that the emphasis on outcome based services and competency-based education has pushed this skill set out of the professional arena.

Similar pressures have begun to appear in Canadian social work education through the adoption of competency frameworks, which has led to several discussions within the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE), the regulating body of social work curriculum

in Canada (Boudreau, 2015; Todd, 2012). Competence models were developed from a behavioural, positivist perspective to identify behaviours and skills needed for an occupation. It has been argued that these models:

provide a transparent blueprint of what students can expect to learn, what teaching will ensure is provided, what practitioners have a responsibility to master, and what consumers and policymakers can expect from a particular professional group (Bogo, Mishna, & Regehr, 2011, p. 276)

This argument appears to neglect an understanding of the politico-philosophical foundations which underpin competency-based education. Focusing on competency leads to a professional who works to “reinsert” those who were excluded and marginalized into society, instead of being a profession which aims to change the society as a whole (Boudreau, 2015). Bogo, Mishna, & Regehr (2011) suggest that people who use social work services are “consumers”, which raises the concern of using capitalist language in the domain of human services. Using such language colludes with capitalism, which in its neoliberal form is ultimately a system of wealth concentration.

Competency-based education focuses social work on the technical and measurable aspects of practice, rather than the “liberatory objectives of the profession,” which ultimately place teaching and social work practice in the hands of external regulators (Boudreau, 2015, p. 1). These regulators often favour the neoliberal demand for evidence, which mirrors the same bureau-professionalization that Munro (2004) described. Students' quest for evidence and competencies through the demand for concrete answers about what to do in the field gives rise to a certain irony: While the “hard sciences” cope with Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty or

indeterminacy, the social and behavioural sciences seem to prefer a Newtonian version of science where one can achieve certainty (Kuhlmann, 2009, p. 74).

The desire for certainty leaves the field of social work with the belief that practice is easier once it is standardized and qualified through specific competencies; however, competency models cannot adequately capture social work practice since skills are seemingly meaningless outside of the professional relationship (Todd, 2012). Since the professional relationship provides the underpinning to social work practice, it seems confusing to remove the relational from the establishment of competencies.

Interestingly, the participants in my study removed the relational from being professional. Their version of being professional requires social workers to enact professionalism by “fitting into a box,” maintaining rigid boundaries to keep their self “safe,” and removing emotions from their work with clients. This removal hives off the authentic and reflexive self from the relationship, therefore rendering a professional who is detached, guarded, invulnerable, and expert. Moreover, this removal seems perpetuated by competency models which direct students to seek out standardized rules and procedures in order to facilitate the notion of the professional who is detached. This removal seems to naturally create a bifurcation of the concept of professional relationships, and contextualizes participants’ tendency to bifurcate the concept as noted in the findings.

It is worth considering the pressures students are facing: worried about their debt and finding full time employment, students are situated to embrace teaching of competencies and “intervention techniques since they hope it will make them competitive in the job market and allow them to hit the ground running” (Boudreau, 2015, p. 1). This is often echoed in the classroom when students ask: “What do I do when a client is...” and they fill in the blank with

various practice-based problems. They want to know if you are in situation A then you apply intervention A. If you're in situation B, you use intervention B. To reiterate Todd's (2012) question: "...[W]hy are we so insistent in removing the relational at the moment of establishing quality" (p. 3)?

Reducing practice to a set of protocols by focusing on techniques and competencies, teaches students to be focused on the "here and now" (Boudreau, 2015, p. 2). This focus does not leave much room to consider the relationship, and based on the data from this study, results in potential confusion regarding the importance of the professional relationships. The conceptual integration of "professional relationships" seems elusive when only focusing on techniques and competencies, particularly if these techniques and competencies are only linked with enacting professionalism.

Although the bifurcation of professional relationships can partially be explained by exploring how neoliberalism and competency-based education impact the field of social work, these areas do not clarify the tendency for participants to blame their education for their "not knowing" and lack of integration regarding the concept of professional relationships. I suggest that threshold concepts may be useful in making sense of participants' difficulty by describing the concept as "troublesome knowledge".

### **Threshold Concepts: Troublesome Knowledge**

Threshold concepts have been discussed in the education literature over the past decade (Meyer & Land, 2006; Meyer et al, 2008) and have been applied to social work teaching, practice and theory (Morgan, 2012), as well as critical reflection (Foote, 2013). Threshold concepts offer a conceptual shift away from core concepts. Core concepts provide a foundation of knowledge for a subject and can be considered a conceptual 'building block' that increases

knowledge about a subject. Threshold concepts, alternatively, lead to “new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1) and to a “qualitatively different view of subject matter” (p. 6). The transformative potential of threshold concepts is reflected in the way in which they can change an individual’s perception of themselves as well as their perception of a subject. As Davies (2006) contends, “When an individual acquires a threshold concept the ideas and procedures of a subject make sense to them when before they seemed alien. It is the threshold concept that provides coherence” (p. 74).

Consider the difficulty participants had with the integration of the concept of professional relationships, where power and reflexivity fit into the concept of professional relationships, and their tendency to talk about professionalism and relationships separately. By exploring power, reflexivity, and professional relationships as threshold concepts, one may look to apply the concept to practice rather than just understanding the concept. This, in my opinion, is what leads to the transformation – the meaningful integration of the concept with an application to practice.

The model of threshold concepts provides some explanation for the participants’ confusion regarding the term professional relationships. A threshold concept can be identified as “troublesome knowledge” (Perkins, 2006); troublesome because these concepts are “...not clearly defined, [are] intangible and may be counterintuitive or intellectually absurd” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 4). Additionally, concepts are potentially *troublesome* because students may not see the “whole picture” and in the case of this study, may not understand how the various components of a professional relationship come together. This was evident when participants expressed they did not know what a professional relationship was about, yet they proceeded to demonstrate they knew more than they thought they knew. Ellsworth (1997) explains that educators should cultivate “a third ear that listens not for what a student knows (discrete

packages of knowledge) but for the terms that shape a student's knowledge, her not knowing, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and her resistances" (p. 71). The not knowing, forgetting, feeling stuck and having resistance accurately captures the notions of troublesome knowledge.

This troublesome aspect is applicable to my findings, particularly since trying to define a professional relationship not only entails a conceptual challenge, but is also mired with language difficulties; for example, using terms imprecisely or having different terms for similar concepts. All participants identified having a troublesome time articulating what it really means to be professional or relational. Foote (2013) states that "one of the significant issues for social work educators to contend with is the lack of uniformity of terminology" (p. 425), which can exacerbate the troubling nature of concepts that are opaque. Consider concepts such as reflexivity, which is poorly defined in the literature and is often conflated with concepts like reflectivity, critical reflectivity or critical reflexivity. Such concepts can be problematic when there is no uniformity in the literature. Participants struggled with finding the language to explain their knowledge and relied on anecdotal narratives to explain their thinking, which may be linked to the lack of uniformity of terminology, as Foote contends, or may simply reflect their current level of understanding as students.

Compounding the difficulty of troublesome knowledge is a paradigm war between positivist and critical pedagogy/andragogy. Positivist pedagogy/andragogy is arguably the dominant paradigm of medicine and psychology and is the influence behind competency-based education. Positivist paradigms situate a trained professional expert who discharges their knowledge to clients. The critical social work episteme, however, challenges the notion of a trained professional expert by encouraging students to create knowledge through an "analysis of the interaction of their own experience in context with their theoretical knowledge" (Foote, 2013,

p. 431). This interaction between a student's experience and theoretical knowledge allows for a reformulation of their practices, a concept foreign to positivist pedagogies/andragogies. This critical component is a relevant factor to consider when considering threshold concepts.

The Canadian Association of Social Work Education state in the Standards for Accreditation that the core-learning objective for students needs to include critical thinking in professional practice.

Social work students develop skills in critical thinking and reasoning, including critical analysis of assumptions consistent with the values of the profession, which they apply in their professional practice to analyze complex social situations to make professional judgment. Social work students are able to apply critical thinking to identify and address structural sources of injustice and inequalities in the context of a Canadian Society. MSW students are able to apply knowledge of a variety of social work theories and perspectives to critically analyze professional and institutional practices (CASWE, 2014, p. 10).

Educators are called upon to train MSW students as critical professionals; however, the participants in this study wanted the concrete skills and interventions that are typical of a more positivist, competency-based paradigm. Moreover, these competencies were perceived to be more professional than considering relationships or critically appraising the role their own experiences have in the context of their application of theoretical knowledge with clients. The integration of theoretical knowledge with personal experience may be difficult when there is no unity as to the definition of a professional relationship for social work practice. The integrative nature of professional relationships as a threshold concept may bring clarity to students, faculty members, university reviews, as well as accreditation bodies.

**Threshold Concepts: Integration**

Viewing professional relationships as a threshold concept challenges us as educators to consider what knowledge we want students to understand or integrate into their learning. Meyer & Land (2006) suggest that threshold concepts are integrative; they expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of ideas contributing to the exploration of the concept. There were several instances within the findings that suggest an issue related to integration. I want to begin by focusing on what was omitted by the participants within their discussions of relationships during the research interview.

Participants had a difficult time naming the relationship as an active part of social work intervention and oftentimes, the participants' responses were atheoretical and anecdotal. There were no consistencies between the participants with regards to how a relationship is truly useful, or what the "relational skill set" includes, other than suggesting it is indeed a skill which involves rapport building and reflexive practices.

Absences within the data were noticeable and I suggest these omissions point toward an inability to *integrate* theory with practice. As a few examples, the Rogerian notions of genuineness, openness, mutuality, collaboration, empathy, positive regard, concreteness, and warmth, were not mentioned as part of relational practices. Notions of social constructivism, nuances of power, the acknowledgement of a two-person psychological paradigm, psychoanalytic notions of containment, attachment, transference/countertransference, recognition theories, and theories about common core concepts were absent from the dialogues with participants. One participant recalled the common factor literature, but then stated she didn't remember what the common factors were. There seems to be a gap in how participants integrate various concepts to their practices as a social worker.

Additionally, the category of “not knowing” highlighted that participants’ perceived they did not know how to articulate what a professional relationship is, yet as previously discussed, they demonstrated some learning through their dialogue suggesting they know more than they think they know. This is another example of how the concept of integration is vital to the learning of threshold concepts such as the professional relationship.

### **Integrating personal and professional.**

The difficulty with integration also manifested in the data through participants’ focus on keeping strong boundaries and their selves as compartmentalized as possible in order to enact professionalism. Participants didn’t express how their selfhood, their personal lives, personal values, and personal beliefs are connected to their role as professional: in fact, they suggested the personal should be avoided. The notion that personal is not professional is contradicted by theories such as use of self, reflexivity, critical theory, constructivist and anti-oppressive literature. I found it surprising that little attention was given to the importance of these practices not only for the field but also to professional relationships.

With the growing influence of postmodern analyses of power in social work (Chambon, Irving & Epstein, 1999) and anti-discriminatory (Thompson, 2006) and anti-oppressive approaches to social work practice (Mullaly, 2002), social workers have come under heightened pressure to critically reflect on their self and their social locations to minimize the potential harm they could do to clients through the abuse of power, and to understand why and how particular dynamics play out in a given relationship. The liberal humanist notion of self is also contested and replaced with notions of subjectivities and positionalities (Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2005). The postmodern shift aligns with the emergence of a two-person relational paradigm where there is at

least an acknowledgement that we are products of our relationships and constructions (Spezzano, 1996).

The ‘Use of Self’ is arguably a distinguishing feature that separates social work from other professions (Raines, 1996), and allows a social worker to consider the interactions between the personal and the professional. Dewane (2006) suggests the use of self is comprised of several areas: the use of personality, use of belief system, *use of relational dynamics* (my emphasis), use of anxiety, and use of self disclosure. Mandell (2007) describes self-awareness, self-monitoring, and reflection as methods of “doing” ‘Use of Self’ (p. 8). Ultimately, when considering the ‘Use of Self’, we are concerned with the impact of the social worker on the process and outcome of the work with clients (Baldwin, 2013). If the use of self distinguishes social work from other professions, then social work professionals are required to integrate the self, rather than try and avoid it; however, the data suggested that participants perceive professional practice favouring demonstrable and measurable outcomes for clients, rather than focusing on the self. Favouring outcomes aligns with the neoliberal notions of evidence-based and technical models of practice where the focus has shifted away from self and refocused the social worker to look at skills, techniques, and competencies.

Participants struggled to integrate the personal and the professional which contributed to the bifurcation of the concept of professional relationships. One manifestation of this bifurcation occurred when participants did not consider the power they hold, or how structural power, can lead to oppressive practices. While articulating that “power is bad”, participants did not integrate theories about power, thus neglecting to apply the positive and helpful aspects of power to practice and maintaining the separation between power and professional practices.

**Integrating power.**

I contend that threshold concepts continue to be useful in understanding why the participants have difficulties, namely that power is troublesome and integrating the concept of power requires more attention. Participants reported having discussions about power during their MSW education; however, they noted that these discussions are usually two-dimensional, meaning their understanding of power results in an oversimplified acknowledgment of power without unpacking the concept or applying it to practice; or, superficially quoting Foucault without being clear as to why we are sensitive to power or what it is. That leaves power as a vague concept without elaborating on what it means for professional relationships.

I am aware that participants are exposed to the concept of power in various courses throughout their MSW education. Some of the ideas they are taught include Foucauldian notions of institutionalized power and the way power manifests and invades all aspects of our society. For example, by distinguishing what is a problem for our clients, we play into the institutionalized professional discourse, which only perpetuates a power imbalance (Xu, 2010). Further, students are challenged to consider how language shapes and justifies the perpetuation of structural power (Ife, 1999). Students are also challenged to think critically and to analyze social situations and transform social relations based on their critical analysis (D’Cruz et al., 2007). These perspectives provide social work students with the capacity to question and potentially change existing power relations. The finding of participants’ “not knowing” perhaps is related to an issue of integration, where participants don’t feel firmly rooted theoretically in issues like power.

Mandell (2007) argues that we need the ability to acknowledge and appreciate the influence of our “self.” This, for Mandell and many critical thinkers, means incorporating the

concept of power into the practice of social work. Critical reflexivity has been praised for being able to allow space for self-reflection while allowing for a curiosity about what produces power and domination (Heron, 2005; D’Cruz et al., 2007). Brookfield (2009) explains that critical theory assumes power and dominant ideology are “inherently manipulative” and propagate ethics of capitalism, white supremacy, “the acceptance of patriarchy and heterosexism...that perpetuate[s] economic, racial and gender oppression” (p. 289). Brookfield (2009) argues that for reflection to be critical, we must uncover and challenge ideologies that are hegemonic in their nature. When we engage in this critical reflection process with our clients and recognize our mutual influence, we are able to create a space for change (Fook, 1999). Despite having theories to assist in critical practice, participants seem to lack the integration of these theories which maintains their “not knowing”. Thinking about power, and as Brookfield and Fook suggest, the need to integrate reflection (or as I have been talking about, reflexivity) along with power, and professional relationships seem apt. Are these theories taught in a disconnected manner? I suggest that ongoing reflection of our clients, our influence on the work with clients, and the impact on our selves perhaps needs to be infused throughout the curriculum, integrated in practicum and continued as part of supervision in the field once employed.

Power can perpetuate hegemonic structures which restrict access to power to those with privilege and dominance (Tew, 2006). Moreover, social workers can experience several forms of power at the same time such as the shared power relationship with their clients in addition to the oppressive and collusive forms of power as they work within public and private organizations. It would appear that the participants in this study were not able to explore their own privilege and how that privilege enacts professional power. This was evident when participants engaged in discussions about boundaries being self protective rather than beneficial to the client.

If we position power to be a threshold concept, this could prompt educators and students to think differently about power, to integrate the theories more concretely and provide a foundation for MSW students to build on. Power, seems to fit the concept of troublesome knowledge since discussions of power can take various directions as highlighted in the previous paragraphs.

### **Threshold Concepts: Irreversibility**

In addition to troublesome knowledge and integration, I also contend that the irreversible nature of threshold concepts is applicable to understanding these findings. Threshold concepts are *irreversible* – the acquisition of the concept being taught is unlikely to be forgotten or will be unlearned only by considerable effort. Meyer & Land (2006) suggest that experts who have crossed a threshold experience difficulties understanding students who have yet to be transformed by crossing the same threshold. Therefore, the “experts” who have crossed a threshold have been irreversibly transformed, limiting their ability to view the world in a non-transformed manner. This could lead to blind spots when trying to teach these transformed perspectives to others and requires educators to become mindful of the fact that their students have yet to cross the same transformative threshold in relation to the concept which is being taught. Perhaps it is this crossing of the threshold which accounts for the perceived absence of discussion in classrooms by professors, instructors or other mentoring individuals regarding professional relationships.

Hallinger & Leithwood (1996) state: “...there are those things that we know; those things that we don’t know; and those things that we don’t know we don’t know” (p. 100). They argue that a powerful theoretical construct will highlight things “we don’t know we don’t know”. A paradox is created here for educators from a threshold perspective: if instructors take for granted

the knowledge they do know, how do we assist MSW students in learning concepts they don't know they don't know? Hearing the call for more student engagement and learning around professional relationships from the participants in my study, I challenge social work educators to consider what transformations they have already experienced and to reflect on how they teach such concepts within their classrooms. Participants expressed a desire for professors to use their experience, knowledge and mistakes to illustrate and deepen the concepts that are being taught. Interestingly, participants described this happening infrequently in the classroom. If we assume the participants are correct, the absence of such discussions may be related to the blind spot that can occur by crossing a threshold of learning.

### **Learning Through Relationships**

Viewing professional relationships as a threshold concept positions the educator to think differently about their teaching, perhaps to gauge where students are within their learning regarding certain concepts. Threshold theory can point us towards a conceptual framework when teaching certain concepts; however, the theory itself does not address how learning can be addressed in a practical and applied fashion. As such, more consideration of the finding 'relationships teach relationship' is warranted.

### **Making connections: Liminality and mimicry.**

I have made the case for using threshold concepts and critical pedagogy to theorize the findings from this study. I want to conclude my discussion regarding social work education by linking to the concept of liminal space. Meyer & Land (2003) characterized "liminal" spaces to describe student transition as they learn difficult or troublesome concepts. The term liminality was used to characterize the transitional space and/or time where rites of passage associated with entry into manhood were observed by ethnographers (van Gennep, 1960; Meyer & Land, 2005;

Turner, 1969). Rituals or states of liminality are often transformative in function and include the acquisition of new knowledge resulting in a new status within the community. The transition is often troubling and unsettling, involving an oscillation between the transformed state and earlier/regressive ways of being. In this case, participants are learning new knowledge resulting in their new status as professional social workers.

I agree with Meyer & Land (2005) that liminality is useful for considering the educational context. Participants described learning from various sources, but emphasize field placements as being integrative of their learning from the classroom, and ultimately the domain where they get to put their learning into practice. When confronted with challenges in placement, it may be difficult for students to feel confident in their role as social worker. Participants described having to “fake” being professional. Interestingly, Meyer & Land suggest that while growth towards this transformed state occurs in liminal spaces (transformed by the notions of professional relationships in this case), individuals may *mimic* their new status.

Cousin (2003) describes mimicry as “bypassing” or “faking it”. “Faking it” can mean securing a good grade in a course without engaging with the concept’s personally transformative potential. Consider how participants quoted Foucault regarding power, or simply acknowledged the concept of power but were unable to expand on how power manifests within professional relationships or *why* it is important. Cousin also argues that students can “churn out dutiful assessment assignments that attract good marks” (p.9) and mimic the expectations of a course or assignment without integrating that knowledge in a transformative way. This reminds me of the participant who stated you could do “shoddy” sorts of coursework and still graduate with an MSW; which suggests that social work education does not necessarily lead to integrating knowledge in a way that transforms the student. As an example, social work students can bypass

an interrogation of their own power by seeing their clients as passive recipients of social work services, which may be oppressive in their delivery.

The phenomenon of mimicry is also relevant during field placement. Participants spoke of their experiences of learning from their placement supervisors, their professors and instructors and their own experiences as clients. The process of “faking it” could potentially be a part of the learning curve whereby students “act” professional while learning what it truly means to be professional. In addition to learning how a social worker functions in a given role, arguably the professional aspects of practice, a few participants spoke about the role of mentorship in relational learning, which would make sense: learning about relationships through relationships.

I believe learning about relationships through relationships to be part of the function of mimicry. Participants described wanting to hear more from their professors regarding professionalism and the engagement of professional relationships. Moreover, they wanted to hear about mistakes their professors have made, and expressed a desire for their instructors to be more involved in classroom discussions: The participants are seeking an example to mimic. Considering mimicry in this way requires some further discussion. I will utilize the Foucauldian notion of the care of the self and the pedagogy of discomfort provide some clues as to the importance of these types of mimicked relationships.

### **The care of the self.**

Entering a caring relationship with others requires what Foucault (1997) described as the care of the self. He cautions that the care of the self is “ethically prior” to entering a caring relationship with others and extends that the care of the self “requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the

self' (Foucault, 1997, p. 287). There are two central ideas here that are worth considering: the first is the role of a guide, counsellor or friend, and the second, is that the care of the self is ethically prior to entering a caring relationship with others. On the one hand, the role of the guide, counsellor or friend is akin to the kind of relational learning the participants described. I believe they wanted guides to demonstrate *how* to be relational so they could mimic this in their practicum and their careers. The care of the self, being ethically prior to entering a relationship with others, resounds with echoes of liminality: one needs to learn about professional relationships before engaging in them. It would make sense that the liminal space of MSW education provide the basis for this learning.

Aligning with the concept of a guide, participants described using mentors as the primary source for learning about relationships. While a few described their placement supervisors, many participants also described their own personal relationship with helpers. Some participants disclosed previous treatment for addiction issues and mood disorders. It was through these experiences of being a client that participants learned both what was effective and what was ineffective in terms of their relationship with their helper. One participant went so far to suggest that Master of Social Work students should be required to participate in counselling to learn about their Self, but also to experience being on the client end of the relationship. This is a pre-requisite for other helping professions such as counselling psychology and is an included component in many post-graduate psychotherapy training programs, but there is no guideline currently which encourages MSW level social workers to seek out their own work prior to entering the field. The integration of theory with the experiential and relational aspects of learning, I argue, is key to learning about professional relationships. What has been added to this idea by the data is that experiential learning also requires a mentor to mimic.

Despite the acknowledgement that relationships teach relationship, the suggestion by participants that relationships are only about building rapport is concerning. It is particularly concerning when it has been argued that social workers need to understand that relationships are central to practice (Sudbury, 2010). The healing potential of relationships has been central to the practice of social work since its inception as I discussed in the literature review; however, the data suggests that MSW students need to learn about professional relationships differently in order to understand relational social work practice.

Creating a collaborative process where the social worker and client are co-participants along with social workers demonstrating consistency, clarity about expectations, empathy, genuineness, acceptance, interest, clear boundaries and a respect for culture and diversity are important to relational social work practice. Relational practice generally employs the skill of empathic attunement whereby social workers can demonstrate understanding and responsiveness to clients' emotional experiences. Research continues to support the use of kindness, understanding and warmth in addition to the notions of genuineness, realness and spontaneity within the helping relationship (Sudbury, 2010; Whiston & Sexton, 1993). It seems that the participants struggled with this genuineness and realness, particularly since they perceived that to be professional requires the removal of self. I suspect having this "removed" relationship that some participants described as "fitting into a box" would make it very challenging to apply concepts of genuineness, realness and other core concepts to professional relationships. Moreover, I would question whether genuineness and realness could be mimicked or learned from a mentor. Integrating concepts like the use of self and reflexivity with the concept of professionalism can potentially assist students discover and utilize their genuineness and realness

while still maintaining ‘professional’ practice. In order to facilitate this integration, instructors have to facilitate such discussions and learning within their classrooms.

The idea that relationships teach relationship is also important to consider as a pedagogical tool. Foucault’s notion of the care of the self may be utilized as a pedagogical / andragogical tool to further facilitate learning about professional relationships. Do instructors foster these kind of relationships in the classroom? Is the model of education currently being provided flexible enough to allow for the development of these relationships? Are field facilitators able to provide relationally based learning during practicum? How is relational learning conceptualized or operationalized? These questions emerge from this study and will require further exploration. However, the pedagogy of discomfort offers some insight into practices which may facilitate progress through the liminal space of learning about professional relationships.

### **The pedagogy of discomfort.**

The pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) is a critical pedagogy whereby students are encouraged to question “cherished beliefs and assumptions” (p. 176) through relationships with their instructors. This places the learner outside their comfort zone to allow for a transformation in a “real and material sense, and not merely a recognition and acknowledgement of difference” (Jackson & Solis, 1995, p. 1). Moreover, the pedagogy of discomfort requires that students experience:

...discomforting emotions, which occur as the very result of attempting to address the “difficult” issues of living with the “enemy-other”, serve as the springboard to uncover and undo the mechanisms with which hegemonic values and beliefs about others continue to operate in daily habits, routines, and unconscious feelings (Leibowitz, 2011, para. 3).

It is relevant to explore pedagogical or andragogical practices that explore the self, particularly in the interest of understanding, integrating and being transformed by the concept of professional relationships. As participants bifurcated this concept, they actively focused on the “professional” side of the concept and in doing so, removed or ‘contained’ their self. To integrate this self potentially requires some discomfort to explore what it is that social workers bring to their work.

The desire to have instructors “call people in/out” was described by most participants who struggled with hearing viewpoints from their colleagues, particularly when these viewpoints stand in contrast to the value and ethical statements noted by the Ontario College of Social Work and Social Service Workers. Moreover, participants felt their professors do not utilize the classroom to challenge, redirect, or deconstruct viewpoints that may not align with the values of the field. I wonder if this “struggle” is related to their desire to have their professors provide an example which they can mimic, and without this example, students are left without an expectation or behaviour to mimic.

It is through the process of discomfort that this pedagogical approach attempts to establish and foster constructive dialogue as well as exchanges between the various voices/experiences brought by students to their classrooms; however, critical pedagogies have been criticized for failing to explore and account for the unequal power relations *within* the classroom. Ellsworth (1989) explains that:

Critical pedagogues speak of student voices as “sharing” their experiences and understandings of oppression with other students and with the teacher in the interest of ‘expanding the possibilities of what is it to be human.’ Yet [differentially marginalized individuals] do not speak of the oppressive formations that condition their lives in the spirit of “sharing”. Rather, the speech of oppositional groups is a “talking back,” a

“defiant speech” that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival (p. 310).

Ellsworth (1989) raises the question as to whether an individual speaks up in the classroom to share their perspective, or to challenge the perspective/concept being taught. While the pedagogy of discomfort has the potential to explore student voices, more work needs to be done to make the classroom a space where “critical pedagogy could address the roles of such notions as fear, trust, desire and risk within classroom discussions” (Redmond, 2010, pg. 8).

To address this fear, trust, desire and risk within the classroom, some educators attempt to establish a “safe space”, a term requiring some deconstruction. Arao & Clemens (2013) argue that the practice of establishing rules and guidelines for students who are learning topics that may be controversial (or *troublesome*), is often framed as establishing a “safe space”. The term, safe space, is hoped to “be reassuring to participants who feel anxious about sharing their thoughts and feelings regarding” a sensitive or controversial topic (p. 135). Through a case study, Arao & Clemens note that the idea of comfort is often associated with notions of safety; however, comfort is antithetical when the element of risk is associated with having conversations about unsettling topics. They recommend that the language shift from ‘safe space’ to ‘brave space’ (p. 136) to assist students in experiencing challenging dialogues about diversity, social justice, their self, subjectivities, social location, or any controversial topics. This bravery may be necessary to help students integrate the uncomfortable aspects of power within professional relationships, to explore the potential misuse of power due to unexamined power relations, and to reflexively use their classroom to explore their own biases, assumptions, beliefs, practices, attitudes and values. Moreover, this bravery may assist in aiding students who are unable to mimic professional relationships early on in their education.

Brave learning requires one to explore: their self, subjectivities and social location; the pressures within the field that shape and constrain the professional relationship, and the influences that work against relational practices. The pedagogy of discomfort combined with the ideas of bravery serves this discussion well as it not only locates the struggle that participants expressed in terms of the exploration of self, but the pedagogy of discomfort uses relationships with others to act as the “springboard” to uncover embedded beliefs and assumptions. The combination of bravery with critical pedagogies may help facilitate the threshold learning of how self is relevant to such concepts as power and professional relationships (McLaren, 1999; Redmond, 2010; Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005).

### **Performativity and Professionalism**

How can one be genuine if, as participants suggest, professionalism can be performed? Participants discussed how enacting professionalism by “fitting into a box” keeps them separate from their clients. Participants described how mimicking or performing professionalism helped to shield the discomfort around beginner’s incompetence (e.g. making mistakes), and led to questions regarding what it means to be a social work professional. The legitimacy of a profession relies on the creation and maintenance of appropriate forms of knowledge and conduct. This knowledge and conduct also serve as a form of discipline over otherwise autonomous professional power social workers have. Thus, being a professional in terms of knowledge and conduct serves to construct a subjectivity rooted in disciplinary mechanisms (Grey, 1998). A Foucauldian approach attempts to explore the relationship between power relations and the tactics of professionalization as they contribute towards the discourses of power and knowledge (Fournier, 1999, 2000, 2001; Powell & Carey, 2007). The notion of performativity however, offers a conceptual tool “omitted in Foucault’s box of tools” (Powell,

2001, p. 79) and has been developed by Foucault-inspired scholar, Judith Butler. Butler's work builds on Foucault, in particular, "developing twin themes of power as productive and of discourse – or rather, discursive practice – as constitutive of subjects" (Powell & Carey, 2007, p. 81). As Butler argues: "Power not only acts on a subject but in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being" (Butler, 1997, p. 13).

Performative acts are forms of "authoritative speech" where the statements are accompanied by a certain "action and exercise a binding power" (Butler, 1993, p. 255). The typical example used by Butler is the naming of a ship. By stating "I name this ship..." we are simultaneously announcing and describing the act while performing the act as well. The distinction between talk and action is obscured by "the apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting" (Butler, 1995, p. 198). As it relates to my findings, the distinction between learning about being a professional social worker and the act of "doing" social work practice in relationship with clients can be opaque. Completing, and passing, an MSW signifies and enacts a student to be called a social worker; however, doing social work practice is far more involved than just completing the program. Participants talked about concepts such as professional power as something to be avoided, but seemed ignorant of how being professional enacts power that can potentially be oppressive to clients. Simply avoiding this power does not abrogate the influence of the power within the relationship.

If we consider the perceived difficulty participants experienced when identifying discourses relevant to the concept of professional relationships, how then do educators understand the transformative process of education from teaching theories to seeing those theories manifested in student practices? Butler's emphasis on power is perhaps central to understanding performativity from a critical stance. As participants perceived, power is often

unexplored, merely attributed to Foucault, and generally is considered “bad” and “should be avoided”. One paradox of being professional is that the title of professional automatically creates an asymmetrical relationship with clients, as the participants described. Therefore, by enacting professionalism, we are creating the subjectivity of a client who is a recipient of professional services. Moreover, we situate ourselves as professionals to deliver services; however, the relational context of that service delivery, along with the power inherent within the relational context seems difficult to locate for participants. Participant bifurcation of the concept of professional relationships further helps perpetuate the notion that professionalism can be isolated and performed away from the relational context where these professional services are provided.

When considering the performance of professionalism, we need to be aware of the “reiterative power of discourse” which not only produces the phenomenon of being professional, but also regulates and constrains what can be considered professional (Butler, 1993). Moreover, these performances of professionalism become institutionalized, codified, identifiable and meaningful over time (Powell, 2012) and may constrict the role of professional to certain behaviours or actions. The data suggest that participants believe that use of self, reflexive practices and relationship building are not aligned with the enactment of being professional: This is an example of the constrictive production of the subjectivity of being professional. Participants are unable to see the linkages between professional and relationship perhaps due to the discourses that influence their perception of what being a professional social worker is about. Arguably, this is an issue of threshold irreversibility as previously discussed. How can we then decipher the performative aspects of professionalism and what relevance does this have for professional relationships? A few scholars (Ball, 2000; Hodgson, 2005; Powell, 2012; Powell &

Carey, 2007; Powell & Gilbert, 2007; Schryer & Spoel, 2005) have taken Butler's notions of performativity and applied them to the realm of professionalism.

First, we engage in social actions (or genres) that directly relate to how we "perform professionalism" through "regulated resources" and "regularized resources" (Schryer and Spoel, 2005 p. 250). Regulated resources refer to the knowledge, skills and language behaviours that align with the neo-liberal practice climate of competencies, whereas regularized resources are behaviours that are tacit, emerging from practice-based situations. Regulated resources in the case of this study could refer to the practice theories which are taught in school. On the other hand, regularized resources suggest practice wisdom which is gleaned from experience in a particular role. Participants in this study elevated being perceived as professional, rather than being relational, which may account for the focus on the enactment of professionalism (regulated resources) while leaving out the concept of relationship. The challenge within these performances and genres is that individual social workers take on diverse roles across varying contexts and therefore, may assume different subjectivities depending on their occupational role within the field. Moreover, genres are products of embedded social practices such as health or social policy, and theories of social work practice. Professions then, draw on these embedded social practices in the construction of their identity (Powell & Gilbert, 2007).

Complications arise when we consider the range of occupations where social workers find employment. The CASW (2005) outlines that social workers provide services on a one-on-one basis and as members of multidisciplinary teams. Social workers are employed by child welfare agencies, school boards, general and psychiatric hospitals, health and community services, correctional facilities, private practice, governments and agencies who provide policy analysis, policy development, social planning, research, and teaching institutions. Each of these

areas bring various procedural commitments and associated genre, “which in turn provide scripts or texts supporting performativity in relation to a complex array of activities” (Powell & Gilbert, 2007 p. 197). I suspect that the range of organizations, the various procedural commitments and genres are what contribute, in part, to troublesome concepts like professional relationships. If professionalism cannot be defined, and is understood to be different depending on the context or genre within which one works, what is it that MSW students are learning regarding professionalism broadly? Moreover, what are the implications for developing professional relationships if the context and genres are varied within the field?

Building on this observation, the various spaces that social workers occupy may not be in harmony with one another; but that dissonance is further compounded by a lack of congruency between organizations and agencies, the espoused values of the social work profession and potentially, the individual values of social workers themselves. In a similar vein, the participants of this study wrestled with the dissonance between their own values, their professional values, and the values of the organizations social workers are employed by. Thus, performance becomes a complex interaction between the social worker and the client, where the social worker is expected to know how to perform as professional. As Powell and Gilbert (2007) assert, “Performance is always relational, drawing others into the act – managers, other professionals, [and] clients...” (p. 193).

I suggest that the participants had difficulty integrating how being professional can be part of a relationship involving a power imbalance. Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of a dialogic self may be useful here. The dialogic self is relative to and in relationship with some other or other parts of the self, to society and to one’s culture. The dialogic self is part of the process when meaning-making results in a revision of identity and subjectivity (Josselson, 1995). Abma (1999)

argues that meaning making and ambivalence may indicate the limit of an old story, or signal a revision to current practices. This is relevant to this study as ambivalence may reinforce constricting organizational and structural discourses that shape the discursive subjectivity of a professional who is not relational. A revision in the identity of a social work professional is necessary in order to integrate the concept of professional relationships. Bakhtin (1990) argued that reflexivity is a dialogic process; however, to revise the identity of a professional who is also relational will require a dialogue within a relationship. The participants described that their learning about professional relationships was ultimately enhanced when they engaged in dialogue with their professors (about their experiences in the field), their field/practicum supervisors (about how professional relationships are useful in a particular role), and through their own utilization of social work services. Relationships teach relationships. Formalizing these dialogical practices may ultimately lead to a revision of the performance of professionalism to be inclusive of relational practices.

### **Cultural Considerations**

I was surprised at the few differences between students from the IFG, CPPO and AFS streams of the MSW program in their views and the discussions of professional relationships. With the exception of the AFS participants (N = 2), participants either did not disclose their cultural background, or requested certain identifiers such as queer or Christian remain disconnected from their data. Moreover, the participants did not dialogue about how cultural aspects of their identity contributed to their perceptions of professional relationships and/or social work practice. I wonder if this happens because culture is viewed as something personal. As participants described what is personal is not professional, it would make sense to omit personal identities such as culture. The risk is that dominant culture, if left unexplored, can

perpetuate misuse of power. Since participants did not dialogue about their culture and had difficulty with concepts such as power, potentially due to its troublesome knowledge status, an integration issue emerges as it relates to the threshold of professional relationships.

Social work has been struggling with the notions of cultural competence for a few decades now; however, most social work models have been adapted to serve clients of various ethnic backgrounds rather than use the cultural values of various populations to develop new models. This contributes towards the implicit expression of Western ethnocentrism (Schiele, 1996). Thus, the concept of professional relationships may not fit for a non-Western practitioner.

For First Nations individuals, self is located at the center of the Medicine Wheel and is represented as a journey through the interaction of the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical aspects of life; aspects considered to be gifts from the Creator. The Wheel provides a model of living and being within a reflective practice of equality. Indeed, the Medicine Wheel is described as the Sacred Tree and used like a mirror to reflect how the self exists and relates to others (Bopp et al., 1988). The southern doorway of the medicine wheel, known as the Zhaawnong, encompasses the emotional and *relational* aspects of life which supports the notion that building and nurturing relationships are integral to living (Absolon, 2010). These relationships can extend to humans, nature, and the spiritual world (Solomon & Wane, 2005). Practices from an indigenous perspective should attend to “supporting and fostering healing relationships within self, family and community” (Absolon, 2010, p.80).

On the one hand, AFS students are required to have a strong understanding of their traditional teachings and how that knowledge assists individuals on their path to healing. On the other hand, they cannot access their traditional ceremonies (e.g. smudging, cedar baths, sweat lodges) because it is not readily accepted in many “Western” practice settings. Part of the

difficulty in understanding professional relationships from an Indigenous perspective may perhaps be related to the Western notions of performing professionalism, where the identity of a professional social worker can be enacted when engaging in professional work and potentially remains separate from the personhood of the social worker. From an indigenous perspective, these two “selves” are intertwined. As it was noted in a different study:

My self is all my relations. From First Nations’ perspective, self is a wholistic process and an ongoing journey. In training or in practice, self is always present... In the context of colonization, my challenge is not how to be aware of or how to bring self into my practice. It is how not to be aware of it, how not to bring it in, how not to [use] my traditional training (Adamowich et al., 2014, p. 134).

As I have been arguing, leaving out the self poses a problem for Western and non-Western social workers trying to understand professional relationships.

Traditional self-reflective practices have been well documented as enhancing cultural influences in practice (Miley et al, 1998); however, this reflection often occurs after the intervention (Lum, 1999). Furthermore, self-reflection is often reduced to exploring assumptions, preconceived notions and personal limitations, and cultural biases. Yan & Wong (2005) argue that social workers are “presumed to be able to manage the influence of their own cultural values and to sustain their professional objectivity when they engage in a professional relationship with clients from different cultures” (p. 183). This description of professionalism suggests that workers can contain and/or suspend their cultural heritage through the performance of a professional self. As Hamilton (1954) argued, the whole purpose of being self-aware is for social workers to make full professional use of their personal self, an idea that seems lost in today’s neoliberal practice environment. The findings supported the absence of this idea in

today's practice world where participants believed that the personal is not professional, adding that the personal should be avoided to protect the social worker, as opposed to seeing the personal as one aspect of relationship that could be ethically embraced.

There may, however, be a more unconscious attitude at work here. Members of a dominant culture have the privilege of not having to consider how culture operates in professional relationships, where members of the non-dominant culture cannot escape it as noted in the First Nations perspective I have presented. It is documented that social work students often lack readiness to deal with difficult or challenging discussions about race or other oppressions (Lee & Greene, 2003; Razack, 1999). Moreover, students tend to deny their own role in occupying privileged identity positions, such as being a professional social worker. This denial may leave social work students unaware of the power that is present in their interactions. Many students display reactions including anger, resentment or guilt particularly when facing issues of white (dominant) privilege (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Julia, 2000). The difficulty with these reactions is that they are normative in the process of becoming "culturally competent" (Abrams & Gibson, 2007); however, students do not seem to move beyond these defensive responses to a critique of privilege (Helms, 1995) or power, suggesting that the competency model of cultural awareness needs to shift (Abrams & Moio, 2009). The adoption of critical race theory with social work pedagogy has emerged as such a shift. Critical race theory addresses the need for diversity or cultural competence training to include a rigorous race analysis to provide students with a perspective and tools to identify and respond to exclusionary or oppressive social work practices (Razack & Jeffery, 2002).

These cultural considerations reinforce the need for social work to define professional practice in a wholistic manner, to be inclusive of various "ways of knowing" and consider that

the personal and professional are intertwined. In addition, the language of professional relationships needs to apply to all aspects of professional interventions, not just clinical social work practice.

### **Implications & Recommendations: Education**

The findings from this study suggest reviewing academic and educational practices, policies and andragogical/pedagogical approaches to teaching graduate level social work students. The participants of this study spoke ambiguously about professional relationships; for students who struggle with such concepts, locating answers within their education are challenging endeavors while learning “how to do” social work practice. Educators perhaps need to understand liminal spaces, mimicry, and how students integrate professional relationships both in theory and in practice.

Educators need to identify crucial points which allow students to gain important conceptual understandings. These moments are referred to as “jewels in the curriculum” (Land, Cousin, Meyer and Davies, 2006, p. 198). Focusing on these jewels “allows for richer and more complex insights into aspects of the subjects students are studying” (p. 198). An awareness of these jewels can also alert educators to areas where students’ encounter troublesome knowledge and conceptual challenges. The participants in this study found professional relationships, power and reflexivity troublesome; however, their learning about these concepts does not necessarily occur at one specific point within MSW education. An examination of how these troublesome concepts emerge throughout a student’s education seems important to identify where students experience transformation within their learning.

The participants in this study suggest hearing more about professor experiences, utilizing their field supervisors to build on conceptual knowledge, and integrating their own experiences

as a client of social work services to integrate the material they are learning within the classroom. Students are required to engage with the concepts they are learning. While Land et al., (2006) suggest tutors help students to develop their understanding, I believe professor engagement is equally important. Students, hopefully, can explain concepts, represent them and apply the concepts they are learning to their lives. This type of engagement with material facilitates students to think like a social worker. Land et al. suggest that educators question which form of engagement is most helpful to bring about transformative understandings of troublesome concepts.

Educators also need to “listen for understanding” (Land et al., 2006., p. 199). It is potentially challenging for educators to consider the conceptual difficulties and obstacles that students experience when learning, which is noted in threshold theory as the concept of irreversibility as previously mentioned. Also, the third ear concept (Ellsworth, 1997) asks educators to be reflexive of their positions, and to consider the conceptual and emotional journeys students experience as they progress in their education.

Educators and students are challenged to face the “discomforts of troublesome knowledge” through a “supportive liminal environment” (Land et al., 2006, p. 200). Considering the classroom as a brave space located within the pedagogy of discomfort, social work students should expect to come into their graduate level classroom to experience being unsettled without affecting the efficiency or utility of their education. Participants in this study are involved in a faculty of social work that promotes these reflexive practices, noted by a course dedicated to exploring reflexivity. In the wake of this reality, participants appeared to be caught in the ambivalence of processing through threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge without yet being able to integrate their learning of these concepts.

**What is a social work professional?**

The question of what it means to be a social work professional has challenged the field since its inception and continues to confuse social work students. This challenge was proclaimed at the establishment of the field when Flexner's 1915 speech suggested that social work was not a profession; however, other voices have suggested it is a bureau-profession (Munro, 2004), an occupation (Christie, 1998) or a vocation (Bonnick, 2011). Social work continues to be compared to psychology, nursing, medicine and other helping professionals, leaving the legitimacy of the profession questioned (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Potting, Sniekers, Lamers & Reverda, 2010). The challenge is to integrate the many theories and practices that provide some boundaries for what is professional and relational. I argue that social work research needs to continue to explore the notions of professional relationships. Moreover, educators need to be aware that students experience the liminal space which is their MSW education and foster learning which assists in the transformation of students regarding how professional relationships are relevant to practice.

Statements regarding professionalism by regulatory bodies speak to ethics and codes of practice, but they do not engage with the actual occupational actions/practices social workers engage in on a daily basis. Without meaningful discussions around professional relationships, some social work students may not be able to find meaning within the concept and continue to struggle with what being a professional social worker actually entails, particularly when expected to "get it right" and demonstrate the efficacy of social work interventions. Further, the bifurcation of the concept perpetuates a focus on "professionalism" while leaving out the relational components of professional relationships, thus making it difficult to integrate the concept of professional relationships.

Threshold theory provides a lens to understand the troublesome knowledge that is professional relationships. While the relationship is understood to underpin social work practice, evidenced by the statements of national and international associations of social work, students experience difficulties in acquiring this knowledge for a number of reasons. It is up to the educator to develop approaches to enhance student mastery. Professional education and the notion of threshold concepts transform a student's understanding, and in doing so, 'induct' them into the way of thinking in the discipline (Davies, 2006). Threshold concepts are characterized by the integration of knowledge. The underlying episteme of professional relationships may be challenging for students who are seeking measurable skills to demonstrate the efficacy of their practice without integrating the professional and relational.

### **Limitations**

This small scale, exploratory study highlighted how participants experienced limited capacity to engage in the integration of professional relationships. The meaning of the concept of professional relationships, while important, remains ambiguous for the participants. This study highlights that some students struggle with the concept of professional relationships; however, it is unclear how common this struggle is. This study was conducted at one Faculty of Social Work and may not actually reflect students within other faculties.

Cultural considerations are not well represented within this study, particularly since the participants chose not to disclose any culturally-specific identities within the findings. A subsequent study may be helpful in exploring how various cultures approach the concept of professional relationships. This may be particularly helpful for social work as the demographic of social workers include various cultures. I suspect there would be a difference between cultures focused on the individual and cultures focused on community or the wholistic connection

between individuals within that community. Social identity and social location also influence the perception of professional relationships, and by extension, there may be additional considerations for cultures who view the interconnection between the individual, community and the environment.

Lastly, this study was conducted during the course of the participants' MSW education. Given that they have not completed their degree yet, it is plausible their knowledge and discussions would have been different at the end of their education. I believe it is also relevant to acknowledge that learning doesn't end at the completion of a degree. The troublesome experience of threshold concepts, the challenge to integrate and be transformed by integrating threshold concepts may be a process which extends beyond the academy and into the field.

### **Future Research Directions**

This research has highlighted the many challenges and gaps experienced by some students when trying to navigate learning how to become a professional social worker. When professionalism gets intertwined with concepts of relationality, participants in this study appear to be ill equipped to incorporate professionalism with relationally based practices. Indeed, the very nature of professional relationship seems elusive. This research marks the first phase in a research program exploring professional relationships and the manner in which this concept is taught and understood within graduate level social work training. Utilizing the findings of this study, I have distilled two major directions for future research related to this topic:

- First, I would like to complete a similar study on master level social workers who have been in the field for various durations of time (2 years, 5 years, 10 years, 15+ years, etc.) to further consider the manner in which the concept of professional relationships becomes integrated over time;

- Second, a pedagogical study exploring professors' understanding of threshold concepts as they apply to their teaching practices, to examine whether educators can benefit from positioning concepts as troublesome knowledge to better understand the difficulties students experience when learning threshold concepts.

### **Concluding Reflection**

When I began this journey, I set out to articulate something that I intuited—relationships are central to our personal development, to the work that we do, and to the growth of the people with whom we work (both colleagues and clients). In the initial stages, I could not appreciate or comprehend the complexity of thought and theory involved in developing something seemingly “natural” to the social worker – their professional relationship with clients. It is with a newfound respect for the conceptual complexity of professional relationships that I will advocate for the centrality of relationship and the integration of relational concepts within social work practice. I have a renewed sense of awe for the mentors in my life, as well as a profound sense of honour for the clients who so willingly place their trust in me to build a professional relationship that fosters growth and change in their lives.

### **Appendix 1: Wilfrid Laurier University Informed Consent Contract**

Research Title: Navigating the hall of mirrors: A grounded theory of professional relationships in social work.<sup>4</sup>

Lead Researcher: Todd Adamowich, PhD Candidate, RSW

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore what the concept of a professional social work relationship means to MSW students and how students come to those meanings/understandings. Work degree. The research is conducted in the context of a doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University.

#### **INFORMATION**

This study's central question is: What does the concept of "professional relationship" mean to Master of Social Work Students? This question will be explored through a semi-structured interview where the researcher will ask you questions regarding your understanding of professional relationships within social work. With your consent, the conversation will be audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. The findings will be written up into a dissertation. Once the dissertation is written, you will be emailed with a copy of our transcript for you to review to ensure I have captured our discussion correctly. You will have the opportunity to clarify any information before the final draft is submitted.

#### **RISKS**

There is a risk that you may feel exposed through the interview process, particularly as the researcher is part of the institution you attend. Confidentiality is of utmost importance and will be maintained at the highest level. As an instructor within the faculty of social work, participants may feel inadequate, ill equipped, or judged particularly if I have taught the student previously. You have the option of being interviewed by someone other than myself to minimize any perceived judgement from this researcher. Moreover, I would also like to acknowledge that participants might have me as an instructor after this research is completed or may see me in the hallway at the FSW. While I cannot anticipate whether I will be selected to teach again in the future, students do have the option of selecting their courses and instructors, as generally there are multiple sections of the same course. Further, please be aware that participating in this study will not impact any future grades in your courses should I be you instructor. Should they see me in the hallway, I will leave the decision to the student to engage in dialogue with this researcher. I am open to your suggestion of how to further minimize any risk regarding your identification. Please feel free to share with me some strategies. I will also make myself available after the interview should you have any concerns, or additional information to share.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's initials

<sup>4</sup> This was the working title at the beginning of the project. It has since been renamed to better reflect the data analysis and discussion.

**BENEFITS**

The study is expected to help clarify what theories inform student understanding of the professional relationship. Additionally, I hope to have an enriched understanding of this concept, and to contribute to the revaluing of relational practices noted within the social work literature. Moreover, this research will contribute to social work's understanding of professionalism and how these topics are taught to social work students. This research may benefit participants by providing opportunities to reflect on their own learning, thereby enhancing their professional practice. Participation may lead to feelings of empowerment, affirmation and increased self-esteem by making concrete links between participant's learning and their practice.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All personal, identifying information about yourself will remain confidential and will not be included in the dissertation. All audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a locked file that is only accessed by myself, and will be physically destroyed once the final report has been submitted. The research results will be published as a dissertation. There is potential this will be published as a series of journal articles and will also be shared at presentations, conferences, and community workshops. Any quotations used in the report and presentations will not include your name or any identifying data to ensure confidentiality.

**COMPENSATION**

A voluntary draw will be conducted at the end of the data collection period for a \$200.00 prepaid visa card. This prize is offered as a thank you for your participation in this study.

**CONTACT**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Todd Adamowich, at [adam1209@mylaurier.ca](mailto:adam1209@mylaurier.ca) and 289-253-7126. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 5225 or [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca)

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty while the data collection process is occurring. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit the answers to any questions you choose.

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Participant's initials

**FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION**

You will be provided with an executive summary of the findings by by email. Results should be available by or before July 2016. Publication will occur after the successful defense of this dissertation study.

**CONSENT**

I have read and understand the above information. I understand the audiotapes, transcripts, and final report will not be used for any additional purposes without my additional permission. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT TO USE QUOTATIONS**

I consent to the researcher including my quotes in the final report, after I have had the opportunity to review and approve the transcript of our conversation.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2: Demographic Information

Note: Participants will be informed they do not have to answer these questions and may select “prefer not to answer” as an option to any of these questions. These responses will also be kept confidential

Name:

Address:

Email address:

Telephone Number:

Are you currently a student at the faculty of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University?

What program stream are you in? (Two-Year, Advanced Standing, Part Time, AFS)

What concentration are you in? (IFG, CPPO, Integrated)

Undergrad Major:

Age:

Gender Identification:

Do you identify in any other way that you are willing to share? This is being asked as part of the analysis of the over all project, to see if there are differences based on life experiences, culture, race, ability, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. Please remember answering this question is optional and answers will be kept confidential.

### Appendix 3: Student Interview Conversation Guide

“Our interview today is part of a study in which I want to explore MSW students’ perceptions of the concept of the professional relationship. I would like to gain an understanding of what the concept of ‘professional relationship’ means to you. I’ll also be asking you how you developed your understanding of it, and whether you see this concept as being relevant to your practice.”

- (1) Can you tell me what the term “professional relationship” means to you?
  - Probe: What makes a relationship between a social work service provider and a service user “professional”? Example? Are there considerations for professional relationships between a social worker and their professional colleagues?
- (2) Can you tell me what theories, concept, principles or values you have been learning about that contribute to your understanding of the professional relationship?
  - Probe: concepts such as power, self-reflection, client-centered work, empowerment, theories such as counter/transference, skills such as self disclosure, other examples?
- (3) What is your understanding of how a worker uses professional relationships in practice?
  - Probe: how to the concepts learned (Question 2) translate into actual practice? Example?
- (4) Would you say your ideas about what a professional relationship means or looks like, has changed as a result of your learning in the program (class or field)?
- (5) How do you incorporate your understanding of relationships with your development as a social worker?
- (6) What challenges might there be to fostering a professional relationship with clients?
  - Probe: Work environments with asymmetrical power relations IE. Children’s Aid, Forensic Social Work, Mandated Clients, other examples?
- (7) If you could advise the FSW instructors and practicum supervisors how they can best teach students about the professional relationship, what would you tell them?
- (8) Is there anything that you can think of, that I haven’t asked about, or that you’d like to add to what you have already said?

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