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Ontological (In)security in Early Career Social Work during COVID-19: Experiences in Scotland

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Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on the working lives of professionals has been of much interest. Within social work, the pandemic increased workload demands, whilst the way in which work was done shifted significantly. This article uses data gathered from newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) who began their working lives during the pandemic. These first years in practice are viewed as an extension to social workers' formal education and as a vital stage in their professional development. Survey ($n = 124$) and interview ($n = 12$) data were gathered from NQSWs across Scotland. Findings were considered through Giddens' lens of ontological security, to explore NQSW transitions during a context of pandemic disruption and its impacts on NQSWs' confidence and competence, as well as their sense of self and identity. Consistent with other studies, respondents were most impacted by home working and the associated isolation and separation from colleagues, particularly when engaged in emotionally charged work. Findings uncovered a trichotomy of experience, with variation in the quality and availability of some formal supports—induction, training and learning and development—and informal support. Implications for practice include a need to focus on how

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we support and nurture NQSWs at such a critical stage in their professional socialisation.

Keywords: COVID-19, early career social work, newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), ontological security, professional identity, supervision

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Introduction

There are now several studies that report on the professional experiences of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK (e.g. [Cook et al., 2020](#); [Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021](#); [Kingstone et al., 2022](#); [McFadden et al., 2022](#)). Studies such as these point to a range of additional challenges faced by social workers in the UK in this period. However, no UK studies, and only one international study ([Senreich et al., 2021](#)) could be found which focused on the experiences of newly qualified social workers during COVID-19. This gap is at odds with the scrutiny placed on this group, as reflected in debates about their ‘readiness to practise’ ([Manthorpe et al., 2015](#)).

Early career social workers or newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) have been defined as those within five years post-qualification practice ([Petersén, 2023](#)), although some social workers themselves no longer see themselves as ‘newly’ qualified beyond the third year of qualified practice ([Grant et al., 2022](#)). In another study, members of the authorial team have tracked the professional development of NQSWs in Scotland over five years from 2016 (hereafter referred to as the ‘2016 NQSW study’—see [Grant et al., 2017b, 2022](#)). This study underlined how professional learning continues beyond qualifying education and occurs through formal and informal relationships and interactions. COVID-19 re-shaped this experience. The current article presents an analysis of data taken from a separate study of NQSWs who began practising in Scotland in 2020, at the height of the UK pandemic. Understanding the experiences of these NQSWs provides insight into their ongoing needs and lessons about support for NQSWs during crisis periods as well as periods of relative stability.

The article begins with a review of the core literature on NQSW transitions and social worker experiences under COVID-19. Key elements of Giddens’ theory of ontological security and its adaptation to NQSW transitions are then presented, followed by an overview of the study methodology and ethical issues. Key findings are presented through the lens of ontological security. Core limitations of the study are provided

before key implications are drawn out in the discussion and conclusion sections.

NQSW transitions before and during COVID-19

Evaluative research on NQSW transitions has shown the importance of particular material and practical support for successful transition. These include induction, learning and development (Hussein *et al.*, 2014; Grant *et al.*, 2017b) supervision (Hussein *et al.*, 2014; Carpenter *et al.*, 2015) and, though less well covered in most evaluative literature, informal support arising from wider team support and working relationships with peers and other colleagues (Grant *et al.*, 2017b; see also Cleveland *et al.*, 2019). The focus in such evaluative research has been the impact of these supports on NQSW ‘outcomes’—competence (readiness to practise), confidence and retention within the profession. Within this work professional identity is treated as a correlate, proxy or outcome of these other NQSW outcomes. This has a rationale since professional identification is related to role performance, self-efficacy and continuation in that profession. The latter three factors are also what many employers (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2015) and NQSWs themselves (Carpenter *et al.*, 2015; Grant *et al.*, 2017a) are most overtly concerned about. However, consequently, the psychological, affective and relational dimensions of NQSW transition become submerged in such evaluative research.

Other, predominantly small sample qualitative studies, do address NQSW trajectories as a process of professional identity formation but carry less focus on the effective dimensions of transitional support. Kearns and McArdle’s (2012) narrative interview study used a framework of ‘being, belonging and becoming’ and concluded that a positive self-image and a sense of relational supports within the workplace were more significant than self-perceived skills in social work identity formation. Moorhead’s (2021) longitudinal study of Australian NQSWs illustrated how their transitions were shaped by an interaction between individual, relational and systemic factors. Petersén’s (2023) substantially larger mixed methods study into the career pathways of Swedish NQSWs analogously locates these pathways as the product of an interaction between individual career goals and contextual conditions. Finally, Pullen Sansfaçon and Crête’s (2016) longitudinal study of NQSWs in Canada explored professional identity formation as a process involving the harmonisation of individual identity and values with those of the social work profession. Their findings suggest professional identity as a repeatedly accomplished process, subject to ongoing redefinition in relation to professional, as well as broader life, contexts.

The studies cited all took place before the pandemic and there is a dearth of detailed data regarding how COVID-19 has impacted NQSW

transitions. The only retrieved study of NQSW experiences under COVID-19 was undertaken in New York, based on a one-off focus group with sixteen recently graduated social workers who started practice in 2020. These social workers were noted to have derived pride from providing support during a pandemic, and an appreciation of their social work identity in doing so. There were also reported experiences of isolation, an erosion of boundaries between home and work life, and challenges in maintaining effective self-care routines.

The UK studies of the general social work workforce have reported notable increases in stress and workload and decreases in well-being for social workers since the pandemic began (e.g. Cook *et al.*, 2020; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021; Kingstone *et al.*, 2022; McFadden *et al.*, 2022; Neill *et al.*, 2022). This is broadly consistent with international findings (e.g. Seng *et al.*, 2021; Wang, 2021). The UK evidence also suggests some variation, likely connected to rapidly changing work patterns and workloads early on under COVID-19. During the first UK lockdown, some social workers reported improved well-being and job satisfaction. Increased team check-ins and a decrease in travelling time were one factor behind this (Cook *et al.*, 2020; McFadden *et al.*, 2022), another may have been an initial decrease in workload arising from reduced referrals to statutory social work agencies (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021; Kingstone *et al.*, 2022). The small data within these UK studies specifically regarding NQSWs suggest these early workforce ‘gains’ may not have been shared by NQSWs. Cook *et al.* (2020) suggested social workers who did not have established relationships with colleagues were more isolated through the move to predominantly online working, whilst Baginsky and Manthorpe (2020) reported that experienced colleagues thought home working was more difficult for NQSWs given their greater dependence on colleagues for advice and support.

Ontological security

The concept of ontological security was developed by Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), drawing on RD Laing’s work. It refers to a ‘person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world’ which ‘includes a basic trust of other people’ (1991, p. 38) and underpins psychological well-being. Ontological security requires having satisfactory assurance to four types of existential questions: existence itself, the relationship between human life and the external world, relationships with other people and self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Giddens’ use of the concept is situated within earlier work (1984) that frames social reproduction as a simultaneous product of social structure and human action. Structure exists only through its instantiation in human action, via ‘rules’ which condition the range of possible actions, and ‘resources’ that a given actor is able to draw upon in

social action in a particular time-space pathway (Giddens, 1984). ‘Practice consciousness’ refers to actors’ tacit knowledge regarding the utilisation of rules and resources in given contexts. The routines facilitated by practice consciousness are linked to the conditions for ontological security since they allow an individual to interact in the social world free from paralysing existential anxiety (Giddens 1984, 1991). However, Giddens (1990, 1991) also argues that routines, particularly those relating to self-identity, have an intrinsic instability related to the pace of social change, an increased focus on managing uncertainty and risk, and the erosion of pre-given social identities. Consequently, there is ongoing need for individual reflexive action and self-definition.

Ontological security can be understood as a foundation providing personal stability and constancy within, and despite, wider instability and change and which can thereby ‘carry the individual through transitions, cases and circumstances of high risk’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 38). In respect of self-identity, Giddens identifies biographical continuity—an individual’s coherent sense of self beneath changing social identities—to be based on a trust in the reliability of personal relationships and broader material environments around them. When such a sense of selfhood is not available, it gives rise to existential anxiety and feelings of shame arising from an individual’s experienced sense of personhood failing to match their aspirations for it (Giddens, 1991).

At this point, it is useful to draw out some core points from the discussion so far. First, little has been reported on NQSW experiences under COVID-19. The few data there suggest NQSW experiences may have been more negative than those of their more experienced colleagues, which were in turn increasingly difficult as the pandemic progressed in the UK. Secondly, this article offers a contribution by applying the lens of ontological security to NQSW transitions. It is proposed as a means of linking the material, practical dimensions of organisational support associated with positive NQSW transitions, and the psychological, emotional and relational dimensions of professional identity formation: it offers a means of bridging the ‘effective’ and ‘affective’ dimensions of NQSW transitions.

The concept of ontological security has been previously applied within social work to explore the physical and psychological loss of home and community following Hurricane Katrina (Hawkins and Maurer, 2011), as well as within international relations to explain the conduct of nation-states (e.g. Steele, 2008) and housing studies (e.g. Dupuis and Thorns, 1998) as a schema for exploring the meanings of home ownership. Giddens’ observations about reflexive self-identity accomplishment resonate with an understanding of social work identity formation as the negotiation of coherence between personal selfhood and projected professional identity, and between projected and achieved professional identity (Pullen Sansfaçon and Crête, 2016). Using NQSW literature on

Table 1. NQSW markers of ontological security/insecurity

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1. Transition to social work identity biographically continuous with reflexive sense of personal values and projected professional self.
 2. NQSWs begin to engage in practice conscious work routines through which they are able to apply rules, and draw on resources, in social work action.
 3. NQSWs trust in the reliability of working relationships and organisational material contexts around them.
 4. NQSW ontological security associated with feelings of control and security. Insecurity associated with anxiety and shame.
-

professional identity alongside these prior applications, markers of ontological security/insecurity in NQSW transitions were developed which were applied to the study data (see [Table 1](#)). One qualification should be noted regarding the development of practice-conscious routines. Although [Giddens \(1984, 1991\)](#) refers to these as non-conscious, NQSWs are adapting to new ways of practising social work within their organisations, and actively learning how to apply the rules and resources of ‘social work action’. We therefore follow [Dupuis and Thorns \(1998\)](#) in considering the development of practice-conscious routines as a conscious, rather than non-conscious, process.

Methods

Methods were informed by the 2016 NQSW study ([Grant et al., 2017a, 2022](#)). This study replicated elements of the 2016 study design by employing a national online survey as an efficient method to collect data from a significant sample of respondents ([Hewson, 2020](#)). Computerised self-administered questionnaires have emerged as a dominant and cost-effective method of data collection across a wide range of topic areas ([Callegaro et al., 2015](#)). However, given that a survey offered limited ability to capture nuance and complexity ([Clark et al., 2021](#)), follow-up semi-structured interviews were also included to add breadth and depth to the findings ([Flick, 2009](#)). Given the context of COVID-19, these were conducted online.

The survey was disseminated via an online link in November 2020 to all social workers on the mandatory Scottish Social Services Council register of social workers who had qualified in 2020. The survey closed six weeks later; a reminder email was sent halfway through. From 296 registered NQSWs, there were 124 completed responses, a response rate of 41.8 per cent. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Twelve respondents volunteered and were interviewed in January and February 2021. The survey, interview schedule and summary of some available biographical data from the sample are provided in [Supplementary files](#).

Quantitative survey data were sorted and examined in Excel for frequency distribution (Brookfield, 2021), and qualitative survey and interview data were initially subject to a form of thematic analysis (King and Brooks, 2017), whereby data were first initially coded in Nvivo taking codes derived from the interview and survey questions as a starting point, and then iteratively refined through engagement with the data to generate final themes (Flick, 2009). During this stage, frequency data were cross-checked with interview and qualitative survey data in a process of triangulation (Deacon *et al.*, 1998). For the purposes of this article, the data were re-read and re-coded against the four markers of ontologically secure NQSW transitions set out in Table 1. Themes were refined until the four most significant ones illustrated here had been developed: Home working; Formal support; Informal support; and Overall transitions.

Ethics

Online survey respondents were issued with pre-questionnaire information on the nature and purpose of the study, as well as how their data would be used and stored to support confidentiality. Respondents were informed that by completing the online survey they were providing implied consent for their anonymised data to be used (Callegaro *et al.*, 2015). Semi-structured interview respondents were sent the same information in advance and a consent form to be completed and returned with a digital signature. All documents related to the study were held on a secure server located at Glasgow Caledonian University, which also granted ethical approval for the study. A pseudonym letter is provided when using interview excerpts, other qualitative data are noted to be from the survey.

Findings

NQSWs' overall experiences could be grouped into roughly equal proportions of 'good', 'mixed' and 'poor' reports—corresponding to ontologically secure, moderately ontologically secure and ontologically insecure transitions. Whilst there was some variation in experiences of the 2016 NQSW cohort (Grant *et al.*, 2017b), the differentiation between the 2020 cohort was more marked. Within the trichotomy, there was some nuance: nearly all NQSWs' in the study had negative experiences of the move to home working under COVID-19, and the vast majority had positive experiences of supervision. Other experiences of formal support (induction and learning and development) and informal support tended to follow the overall trichotomous division noted. In this article, we focus on

understanding how these different experiences affected NQSWs' sense of safety in their social work worlds. For ease of illustration in the space we primarily focus on data that illustrate the contrasting experiences of ontologically secure and insecure transitions. Those exhibiting moderately secure transitions had at least some positive as well as some more mixed experiences of the elements of formal and informal support described.

Home working as barrier to biographical continuity

As for others, COVID-19 posed a threat to NQSWs' ontological security as general citizens. It undermined trust in material contexts and heightened awareness of existential risks. Without exception, the impact of starting to practise in a pandemic had been keenly felt by NQSWs as both professionals and people:

I think Covid's really impacted every angle, and just in terms of like just everything, your work, your training, your friendships, your relationships, your conscience, like I think it's just impacted everything as a whole. (Interviewee, A)

The onset of lockdown also had specific ramifications for social workers due to the marked increase in online and telephone-based home working which provided a challenge for nearly all NQSWs' development of professional selfhood. At one level, this was illustrated by difficulties in feeling like a professional within the home work space, which was often a bedroom:

you miss getting yourself in work mode... when you're in the office surrounded by people and having those experience—it's much easier to feel part of the role. Where at home, you could be anyone, it's someone sat in a bedroom [laughs] (Interviewee B).

The data provided multiple accounts of anxiety and isolation arising from home working. These included difficulties managing emotionally charged interactions with those they were supporting, which felt like more of a transgression for occurring 'at home'. As for social workers in the study of Senreich *et al.* (2021), it was hard for NQSWs to place boundaries around work and undertake self-care activities that might occur in a healthy office culture, such as taking lunch breaks or otherwise ensuring they did not overwork. Data from the 2016 NQSW study gathered at the five-year point in 2021 (Grant *et al.*, 2022) showed this group of practitioners who were five years qualified to have notably more positive experiences of home working than the very recently qualified social workers in this study. These differences may be understood as emanating from the more newly qualified social workers in this study not yet having had the opportunity to develop healthy practice-conscious work routines which could be transferred into home working practices during the

pandemic. Physical distance from more experienced colleagues further impaired the development of such routines.

Home working also posed a challenge to NQSWs' biographical continuity as the practice-conscious routines they were being socialised into under COVID-19 were primarily administrative and technical-rational forms of social work, dominated by online, managerially overseen, assessment practices. Several respondents noted that this practice was distant from what they had envisaged being a social worker to be like—some variation of the discourse of 'this is not what I had expected' was articulated by several participants. B, for example, commented that this form of social work practice was 'so far away from what social work practice is really all about', and suggested it conflicted with their sense of professional values since it was 'difficult and ethically it doesn't feel that great. the whole ethos of social work is the opposite of that'.

Similar to the finding of [Ferguson et al. \(2022\)](#), five NQSWs shared how they had applied discretion in applying COVID-19 social distancing rules. This occurred when interacting face to face with children and others for whom these rules were particularly difficult, in technical breach of guidance. In this context, such acts of street-level discretion can be read as an attempt to reclaim a more socially just social work practice that was more biographically continuous with their personal and professional values. It allowed these NQSWs to establish a co-present rapport with those with whom they were working that was not possible via the online practice routines otherwise available.

The role of support

Formal and informal support for NQSWs can be seen in both practical terms—the development of knowledge and skills (acquisition of practice-conscious routines), as well as in more symbolic, affective or relational terms (building trust in the reliability of others and material contexts). Allusions to the practical and symbolic dimensions of support, or the effects of their absence, could be found in respondents' discourse. Formal support is considered first.

Supporting practice-conscious routines and trust through supervision, induction and learning and development

The above three named elements of formal support were the most prominent in the data. In contrast to divergences in the experiences of other forms of support, the vast majority of respondents—though not all—had positive experiences of supervision. The frequency of supervision for this cohort of NQSWs had increased when compared to the 2016 NQSW cohort ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Comparison of supervision frequency between 2016 and 2020 cohorts

Supervision Frequency	2016 NQSWs (n = 157)	2020 NQSWs (n = 124)	Difference
Weekly, %	0	11.1	+11.1
Fortnightly, %	8.9	25.9	+17
Three-weekly, %	8.1	8.6	+0.5
Monthly, %	65	39.5	-25.5
Other ^a , %	17.9	14.8	-3.1

^aTypically 6–8 weekly cycles.

Carpenter *et al.* (2015) found that the content of supervision mattered more than frequency for NQSWs. Here, whilst respondents noted that workload management and case-related discussions predominated, fewer than 5 per cent of NQSWs were unhappy with the quality of supervision and 80 per cent felt that supervision was a safe space to express their emotions, suggesting supervision was for most both high frequency and high quality. This is illustrated by interviewee C:

So the formal supervision normally starts with, I will try to be reflective, bring my questions, my struggles, talk a bit about the challenges and where I want to improve. Then move onto case discussion... It's very organised, very frequent, once every two weeks... I think the supervision is all based on the individual needs.

C's structuring of the first part of supervision around their needs illustrates how, in supervision at least, they were able to reflexively influence the social worker they were becoming. Consequently, it is likely that their supervision addressed developmental and emotional as well as case-focused aims, as social work supervision theory indicates it should do (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014). Beyond such delivery of supervision supporting an NQSW to develop knowledge of practice-conscious routines, its provision can also be seen as a mechanism for developing trust between an NQSW and their line manager. Positive experiences of induction and learning and development similarly operated on both practical and symbolic levels. On a practical level, they involved access to the material support of a mentor and peer-based learning and support, opportunities to build networks and for shadowing, and mandatory and specialist training opportunities. All of these supported the development of practice-conscious routines. Symbolically such experiences acted as a mechanism for validating NQSWs' trust in both their manager and the organisation. One respondent described their positive experiences of induction as follows:

My induction into the role was excellent. My Team Manager was very clear when I was offered the position that they would put a lot of support in place for me as a NQSW (Survey)

This induction is framed by the NQSW as a material investment in their individual development (*‘they* would put a lot of support in place *for me*’). It can also be viewed symbolically as validation of the trust the NQSW had placed in their manager and organisation when choosing to take the job.

The third of NQSWs who had the most negative experiences of induction and of learning and development reported an absence of any induction period, cases being allocated with little or no guidance and no, or very poor quality, learning opportunities. This left them feeling anxious about social work practice. Interviewee D, for example, referred to being ‘flung in the deep end’, whilst a survey respondent described that they ‘didn’t feel ready for the situations that [have] arisen’. Secondly, this undermined trust in the reliability of the organisation, and sometimes, their line manager specifically:

I have not been on any training, I have applied but manager didn’t endorse this in time and didn’t get on it. There was online [training] for all new starts but was told to go out and prioritise my case load and couldn’t attend. (Survey)

Trust in colleagues and support to apply the rules and resources of social work action—informal support

First year data from the 2016 cohort revealed that NQSWs placed informal support from their wider team and other colleagues as the single most important factor in transition (Grant *et al.*, 2017a). For the NQSWs in this study, home working created an obvious obstacle to accessing informal support from colleagues, particularly gaining advice from more experienced colleagues. Whilst survey data did indicate that around two-thirds of NQSWs managed to forge new relationships with team members, mostly online, there was nonetheless a three-way split in informal support experiences between good, mixed and poor. At the level of practical support, the most positive experiences were characterised by a blend of a proactive and team-wide approach to peer support; early, regular and sustained opportunities to meet and work alongside colleagues; dynamic team meetings; proximity to other NQSWs; and ready access to NQSW forums. Practically, these assisted those NQSWs in learning the minutiae of the application of rules and resources in social work action; checking out how processes worked in the organisation and in social work practice more broadly; and in learning about available resources for both practice and their individual development.

Informal support also operated symbolically as a facilitator of trust in the working relationships around an NQSW—indeed, the relational dimension was more prominent in NQSWs’ discourse about informal

support than formal support. One interviewee (who had a moderately secure transition overall) described their positive experiences of team support as follows:

my team are really, really encouraging... even [when] I didn't have that relationship established with them... I definitely feel like I can ask for help or ask for guidance and things. (Interviewee E)

Whether NQSWs could approach team colleagues on an *ad hoc* basis was a key differentiator between more and less positive experiences of team support: being able to approach colleagues when that help was most needed built rapport with colleagues (validating trust in the reliability of working relationships) whilst also providing practical help with understanding the detailed application of rules and resources in the organisation (the minutiae of practice-conscious routines). For respondents who did not feel able to approach colleagues in this way, difficulties arose because they did not know when they would need small pieces of advice or support, and they sometimes did not know what they did not know. The result was feelings of isolation from having to work things out for yourself:

it has been difficult, there's no two ways about it... you are very much, at times, on your own... Obviously, if I was really stuck on something, I would phone somebody, but for something small, you don't want to phone people. But whereas if you were in an office with somebody, you could go, 'What does that actually mean?'. (Interviewee F)

Some respondents' discourse also illustrated how the positive experience of a line manager and supervision was insufficient without trust in the wider team:

I feel alienated and left without guidance and support. Even though my manager is very supportive, I feel left out; I'm not able to easily interact with my colleagues to learn the processes etc. (Survey)

The relationship with a line manager is an individual one and, even where strongly positive, was not enough by itself to facilitate an ontologically secure transition in the context of pandemic home working.

Ontologically secure and insecure transitions

For the third of NQSWs who transitioned ontologically securely, positive experiences of formal and informal support helped overcome the increased difficulties which COVID-19, and in particular home working, posed to their entry to the profession. We summarise the suggested mechanisms for this in [Table 3](#). Indeed, transitioning during a pandemic had even become a source of pride for this group which further affirmed a sense of coherence between their personal and professional selves:

Table 3. Ontologically secure NQSW transitions during COVID-19

Factor	Impacts on ontological security
Home working	Undermined trust in reliability of material contexts within 'high-risk' conditions of COVID-19 Impaired biographical continuity of professional self via literal and figurative distance from those working with
Formal Support	Supported development of practice-conscious routines of social work Provided space for NQSWs to reflexively shape the social workers they were becoming
Informal support	Sustained trust in reliability of organisation and persons (line manager) Sustained trust in the reliability of persons (colleagues) Provided assurance around the minutiae of application of rules and resources within social work action
Overall transition	Supported sense that 'the accomplishment of this professional identity is consistent with my personal values and projected professional selfhood'

I only have positives to say! I love my job and although it can be tiring when the days are long, it is utterly rewarding and is hands-down the best decision I ever made was to become a social worker. Current restrictions just add a layer of difficulty but nothing insurmountable. (Survey)

Other survey respondents in this group referred to their pride in the profession's responses to the pandemic whether that be of 'creative ways' of practice, the profession's 'resilience to keep working with families' or its solidarity as illustrated by 'everyone pull[ing] together, and we just keep going even though it's testing times'.

The third of NQSWs who had moderately secure transitions had negative experiences of home working, positive experiences of supervision but mixed experiences of other types of formal support and of informal support. They framed their experiences of starting practice during a pandemic as a marked additional difficulty. Discursively, the group manifested doubts about their current knowledge of social work practice but this was allied with a conviction that they wanted to, and would still, achieve it:

[I tell myself] I can do this, and I do have the knowledge, and I'm qualified, and I can do this job, but the cards that we've all been dealt at this point is just, every single obstacle you can think of, has been flung at us. (Interviewee E)

The third of NQSWs who had ontologically insecure transitions had largely negative experiences of formal support—supervision apart for some—and also of informal support. Discursively, they were distinguished by deep concerns about a lack of knowledge of social work practice as well as marked self-doubt about their professional development:

It's hard to say [what my learning and developmental needs are] as I feel I just need to learn everything. (Survey)

I worry about what I've done, what I've said, but I think it's just that way where you've just got nothing, you've not got training, you've not got support, you've not got supervision, like you've not got what I think you expected to have. (Interviewee G)

The responses of those in this group could be seen to be underpinned by a lack of trust in the work environments around them, anxiety and possibly also shame, that they had not yet developed the professional social work identity they had anticipated doing. The distress at not doing so could be exacerbated by contact with other NQSWs who were enjoying more positive transitions:

I sometimes phone a girl who started with me but end up getting upset as she has loads of training and support and it makes me feel worse when I come off the phone as I have 0 support and 0 guidance. (Survey)

Feelings such as these had already led some in this group to begin questioning their social work careers. This questioning can be viewed as an attempt to reclaim biographical continuity via rejection of a looming spoiled social work identity that thereby jarred with their projected professional selfhood:

And if you came up to me now and said, 'oh you can have your wage for a different job,' I would genuinely walk away right now... it's just totally different being an actual social worker just now. (Interviewee G)

Limitations

This article focuses on the NQSWs' experiences of organisational support during the pandemic and identifies three arising pathways for NQSW transition. The study did not have access to prior baseline data regarding NQSWs. Therefore, it is impossible to say how prior individual-level NQSW characteristics and circumstances influenced the experiences described here. The data do strongly indicate that good, mixed and poor experiences were linked to material differences in support—for example, the accounts of NQSWs with good experiences of learning and development indicated that they *were* receiving more and better quality learning opportunities than other NQSWs. It is possible to say with some confidence that the provision of the discussed supports was important in conditioning the NQSW pathways described. It should be borne in mind, however, that they will not have been the only factors influencing these pathways.

Discussion

This study provides further evidence that specific practical supports are important for secure NQSW transitions, in particular positive experiences of supervision, induction, learning and development and of informal support.

Exploration of the data via an ontological security lens emphasises the importance of also seeing NQSW transition in psychological, affective and relational terms. The provision of good formal support reinforces trust in a line manager and an employer, and informal support trust in the wider team. Together they facilitate an NQSW to feel secure in their job role and support coherence between their personal selfhood, their projected professional identity and their achieved professional identity.

The impact of COVID-19 on NQSW transitions has been primarily explored qualitatively in this article. It is not possible to say exactly how COVID-19 itself conditioned the pathways we describe; however, comparison with findings in similar contexts pre-COVID-19 provides a rough gauge. Hussein *et al.* (2014) found that 40 per cent of NQSWs in England (eighteen months qualified) were 'quite enjoying the job' with 47.8 per cent 'enjoying the job very much'. Carpenter *et al.* (2015) similarly found 80 per cent of NQSWs in England (one year qualified) were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'. Comparably, three-quarters of the 2016 cohort in the 2016 NQSW study (Grant *et al.*, 2017a) stated that they had a clear sense of their professional identity within their first year of practice. This study's findings of NQSW experience under COVID-19 are more pessimistic than these but not markedly so. What is more marked is the clearer differentiation between secure and insecure transitions and the particularly negative experiences of a third of the 2020 cohort under COVID-19.

There are also positive messages within the data: even during a pandemic a third of social workers transitioned ontologically securely having received good formal and informal support at work, two-thirds moderately securely. The fact that the vast majority of NQSWs had frequent and good quality supervision during a pandemic reflects well on the prioritisation of this element of support for NQSWs in Scottish social work. Unfortunately, it was not enough alone. The additional core elements of formal support—providing a good induction and access to good learning and development opportunities—should be feasible for all employers to provide but do require prior infrastructure and planning. Informal support is perhaps the trickiest element for organisations to ensure as it relates to wider team culture and morale that may be harder to influence. These findings, however, add to data (Grant *et al.* 2017a; Cleveland *et al.*, 2019) suggesting the essentialness of informal support to positive NQSW transition. In contrast to Cleveland *et al.* (2019), this study suggests the particular importance of informal support from more experienced colleagues, as well as from NQSWs' peers. Perhaps even more so under COVID-19, experienced colleagues who were able to 'show the ropes' of practice-conscious routines and offer emotional support were highly valued or missed where such support was unavailable.

The study also contains messages of caution. The future implications for the 2020 NQSW cohort are unknown. They were thrust into systems and processes that neither they nor the profession had prepared for. All

frames of reference had been disrupted, all modes of learning skewed, all methods of professional socialisation obscured by a fractured distribution of self in multiple digital spaces from their first day in the job. These NQSWs experienced a rude introduction to the profession. Employers and governments would do well to heed recommendations that the emotional and psychological, as well as professional development, needs of this cohort of social workers should be closely considered in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Senreich *et al.*, 2021). This study illustrates much about what matters to new staff in the first few months of professional social work—albeit in extraordinary circumstances. Ultimately, both during COVID-19 and beyond, whether NQSWs feel their job role sustains biographical continuity will depend on whether their job fulfils the aspirations they had on choosing to become a social worker. Typically, these goals consist of a mixture of personal development, a desire to help others and wider social justice commitments (Stevens *et al.*, 2012). The difficulty in finding space for a social work that is consistent with such aspirations is an ongoing challenge, likely related to poor retention rates within the profession, particularly after a decade of austerity cuts in the UK. Restoring and sustaining forms of social work practice which can meet the aspirations of those entering the profession, as well as the wishes and needs of those people requiring their support, remain urgent and ongoing challenges.

Conclusion

Despite the hugely challenging context of COVID-19 for starting a career in social work, this study demonstrated that it was possible for NQSWs to transition securely in pandemic conditions if adequate induction, frequent supervision, meaningful learning and development opportunities, and informal modes of support were present and accessible. The study showed that such conditions allowed NQSWs to develop trust in the new professional relationships around them, to help manage the challenges of social work practice and to help anchor their sense of self and identity as a fully qualified social worker. This is an important finding in respect of the successful introduction of social workers to the profession in emergency, disaster or crisis contexts. It is also relevant for broader learning about the essential support NQSWs need to transition securely at any point.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at British Journal of Social Work Journal online.

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