Reflections on social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences of faculty members and lessons moving forward

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Abstract
This focused ethnography examines the experiences of social work faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted participant observations of the pivot to distance learning, research and service, and overall responses of the social work community at a Research 1, public university. This article focuses on in-depth, zoom-recorded, individual interviews with 16 social work faculty members during the first year of the pandemic with follow-up communications 1 year later (n = 9). They characterized the pandemic as pervasive, sustained, isolating, changing, embedded within a deeply divided sociocultural context, and having a disparate impact related to faculty members’ positionality. Many described feelings of disorientation, anxiety, fear, loss, grief, fatigue, and strained relationships. Faculty members also described a strengthening of social work’s resiliency through innovative technology, embracing new opportunities to enact professional values of social and racial justice, and meaning making. They consider building on this resiliency moving forward, including in the face of future long emergencies. Their reflections on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest how we may become more resilient by tending to our collective trauma, balancing the benefits of online education with psychosocial needs, and examining how social work ethics interact with academic systems.

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Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of educational systems in history, affecting approximately 850 million learners in more than 100 countries (UNESCO, 2020). In the United States (US), most colleges and universities abruptly shifted from in-person instruction to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), and placed restrictions on research. Such necessary public health measures have caused substantial disruption to the lives of social work faculty. These faculty are entrusted with advancing social work scholarship, preparing the next generation of social workers, and functioning as mesosystems (see Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) linking students to the social work profession, and university scholarship to practice and policy communities. Their experiences of anxiety and stress can create barriers to their professional as well as personal functioning (VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Yet little systematic empirical research has explored social work faculty’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examines the experiences of social work faculty teaching, researching and juggling work-life balance through the first 2 years of the pandemic. An in-depth understanding of their experiences can inform how to best support social work scholarship, teaching and service during this ongoing crisis as well as future emergencies.

The impact of the pandemic on social work faculty
From the beginning of the pandemic, the gray literature has proliferated with editorials and blogs highlighting the technological and psychosocial challenges faced by social work faculty. In 2021, Social Work Education published a special issue on social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic including 19 short, reflective essays from social work educators around the globe. This collection underscores the centrality of national context to the impact of the pandemic on social work education. For example, faculty from wealthier countries report far greater access to technology necessary for ERT (e.g., Onalu et al., 2020). It also reflects resiliency. For instance, some social work programs in Australia, Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia reduced practice hour requirements, and focused instead on ways in which students can demonstrate learning outcomes (see McLaughlin et al., 2020). In the U.S., the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2020) allowed a change from in-person to remote field practice (Morris et al., 2020).

Despite the interest reflected in the gray literature, little empirical social science research has examined the experiences of social work faculty. A CSWE “Pulse survey” from September 2020 reflected concerns among its members about faculty members’ well-being and burnout due to disruptions and increased workloads (see also Tosone, 2020). Indeed, social work programs across the U.S. have experienced unprecedented
numbers of early retirements during the pandemic (Tugend, 2020) resulting in the loss of experienced mentors for younger faculty and PhD students, institutional knowledge and wisdom. In addition, some faculty have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of the pandemic due to their positionality as assistant professors working toward tenure, their gender and racial identities, or their roles as parents balancing care for children at home with their university’s demands for scholarly productivity (Shillington et al., 2020).

The impact of COVID on faculty in higher education

There is an emerging empirical literature on the impact of COVID-19 on faculty in higher education. Studies in nursing, an allied profession similarly concerned with helping those who are vulnerable, is especially instructive. They indicate that the pandemic has negatively affected nursing professors’ well-being, and increased strain between the faculty and administration. For instance, Sacco and Kelly (2021) conducted a quantitative study of 117 nurse educators across the U.S. in the summer of 2020. Most participants reported stress due to uncertainty and difficulty maintaining a work-life balance, frustration with rapidly changing policies and plans, and increased need for more support from university administration. Iheduru-Anderson and Foley (2021) reported similar findings based on qualitative interviews with 41 U.S. nursing faculty regarding transitioning from classroom to ERT. Participants characterized their experience as isolating and stressful, both physically and emotionally. Some also experienced frustration with not having sufficient direction and support from administrators. Faculty perceived their leaders as having little appreciation of their increased workloads, and providing insufficient moral support, communication, resources, and plans for the future.

Additional empirical literature examines the experiences of faculty members in higher education across disciplines in North America. This literature also focuses primarily on teaching, and details changes in instruction with the transition to ERT (e.g., Sims and Baker, 2021). For instance, Johnson and colleagues (2020) surveyed 897 U.S. higher education faculty and administrators from 672 U.S. colleges and universities regarding their experiences of transitioning to ERT. Many faculty expressed feelings of stress and anxiety. Many indicated that they were using new teaching methods, lowering the volume of work for students, and modifying assignments and exams.

Colclasure and colleagues (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with 14 faculty teaching at predominantly undergraduate institutions during the transition to ERT. They expressed high levels of anxiety and stress, a general decrease in career satisfaction, lower teaching performance, and loss of close interactions with students. A majority of faculty also reported difficulty rapidly transitioning their courses to ERT. This transition required faculty to implement new pedagogical approaches and unfamiliar technologies, and to modify course content, which significantly increased their workload. Faculty also experienced a change in their work-life balance, especially those who were parents struggling to meet the demands of childcare along with the increased workload.

VanLeeuwen and colleagues conducted in-depth interviews with 20 faculty members from various universities across Canada regarding their experiences during the early months of the pandemic (VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Faculty described an enormous sense
of pressure to manage their professional and personal roles, which negatively affected their mental and physical well-being. They described being overwhelmed, exhausted, sad, and stressed. They also reported challenges juggling parenting and work, and navigating multiple pressing tasks while enduring social isolation. They described how the widespread closures of universities, schools, and local businesses radically changed their daily routines and the nature of their interactions with others, teaching practices, research capacity, and demands for service activities. Faculty also demonstrated resilience in adapting to new ways of living and working, and how they provided support to others despite their own experiences of stress.

**Conceptual perspective**

At the time of this writing, we are entering the third calendar year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We consider this pandemic to be a “long emergency,” a term originally coined by climate change scientists (e.g., Hampson, 2012; Orr, 2016). In contrast to short term emergencies that span weeks or months, the long emergency refers to the sustained stress to psychosocial and ecological systems caused by the cumulative effects of multiple disasters. Support to populations affected by long emergencies comes more from local communities as larger governing entities become overwhelmed (Orr, 2016). In the absence of national U.S. government leadership and coordinated response to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, states and local communities weighted the threats to public and economic health differently, and responded in a variety of ways. Like the rest of the population reeling from the loss of human life and economic devastation, social work faculty experienced the pandemic within this complex context of uncertainty, distressing social and economic justice issues, and widespread political unrest (Shillington et al., 2020.)

We approach the issue of social work faculty members’ experiences of the long emergency sensitized by developmental, ecological-systems theory (see Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In short, human development extends from conception to death and involves active, lifelong processes of responding to change across multiple embedded, interacting, complex social systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social work faculty are developing in relation to stressors and opportunities within their everyday lives embedded within dynamic family, college or university, community, and larger sociocultural-historical systems.

**Current study**

We approached our study of social work faculty members’ experiences using focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005). Like traditional ethnography, focused ethnography is case-based, and maintains a cultural focus. It modifies traditional ethnography by condensing the research process through relatively focused research questions, shorter periods of intensive data collection, use of video or audio recordings, and the collaboration of multiple researchers with insider perspectives. Our research questions were (1) What do social work faculty members perceive to be the salient features of the COVID-19
pandemic? (2) How have they experienced their work during the pandemic? (3) What opportunities for enhancing resiliency do they identify moving forward? (4) What has changed for faculty members heading into year three of the pandemic?

**Methods**

**Site**

The site of this research was a school of social work within a large, Midwestern, Research 1, public university with Youth Studies, MSW and PhD programs. The school employs 12 associate and full professors, six assistant professors, and seven academic professionals with teaching responsibilities (teaching specialists). In March of 2020, the state governor ordered K-12 public schools to close, and institutions of higher education quickly followed suit. The university halted all in-person activity, and the school of social work shifted all communications and education to a virtual platform in the middle of the Spring semester of 2020 continuing into the 2021-2022 academic year. During the first year of the pandemic, the dean of the college, director of the school, PhD program director, and several more senior faculties retired.

**Participants**

Tenured and tenure-track faculty and teaching specialists were invited to participate through a personal email. Thirteen (89%) tenured and tenure-track faculty, and three (43%) teaching specialists participated. Four of the tenured faculty members had significant administrative responsibilities as school director, program director, or dean. Eleven participants identified as European American, two as African or African American, one as Asian American, and two as mixed race/ethnicity. Years of experience on the faculty ranged from less than 1 year to over 30 years at the school (M = 11.3 years).

One year later, faculty were invited to reflect on any changes to their experiences. Nine (56%) of the original sample responded. All were tenured/tenure-track faculty. Due to the smaller sample for the second wave of data collection, we have concealed demographic details and pseudonyms that may be identifying.

**Researcher positionality**

Our research team is comprised of a Professor, and seven social work PhD students participating in her qualitative research seminar. Due to an untimely faculty death, Professor Haight taught the first year PhD research seminar sequence during both Fall and Spring semester which allowed us sufficient time to launch the project. Six of the researchers identify as European American, one as European-Somali American, and one as Korean.

Consistent with focused ethnography, we have insider knowledge of the context under study. This knowledge allowed us to develop rapport with participants, many of whom expressed delight at the opportunity to support PhD students during a time of educational
disruption. It also allowed us to interpret and contextualize their communications, and collect relevant information in a compressed period of time relative to traditional ethnography. Our insider positionality also required reflexivity through journaling to “make the familiar unfamiliar” (see Padgett, 2017), that is, to avoid overlooking shared, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices.

Instruments

**Demographic questionnaire.** The demographic questionnaire asked participants to indicate their gender, ethnicity, highest graduate degree and discipline, and how long and in what roles they have worked in the School of Social Work.

**Semi structured interview.** In year one, participants first were asked to reflect broadly on the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., “What’s it been like for you?”), and then how it has impacted them as faculty (e.g., “Tell us about your professional experiences since we began working remotely”). Next, they were asked to reflect on how their experiences of the pandemic might be shaped by this particular social-political-historical moment. Finally, they were asked to relate any lessons learned going forward.

One year later, they were simply asked to elaborate any changes in their experiences via email.

**Field notes and documents.** We engaged in participant observations throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. We kept loosely structured field notes describing our own professional experiences. We also collected relevant emails and resources sent from the University and social work department. These included webinars on converting in-person courses to online learning, and support for research. Although they are not formally analyzed in this article, these field notes and documents deepened our understanding of participants’ lived experiences and provided a context for interpreting the interviews, which are the focus of this article.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted towards the end of the first year of the pandemic (December 2020, January 2021). Each of the first seven interviews was conducted by a PhD student researcher as the lead interviewer, and Professor Haight, who provided supportive supervision. Subsequent interviews were conducted independently by students. Students did not interview faculty members with whom they were currently taking courses. The interviews were between 60 and 75 min long and conducted remotely via Zoom web conferencing software. These interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom’s recording and auto-transcribing features. Transcripts were then edited for accuracy by the interviewer.

In year 2 of the study (December 2021, January 2022), participants provided updates to their experiences via email.
**Data analysis.** The entire research team met weekly throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. We all listened to, read, and discussed all interviews. Then, working in pairs, we induced emic codes through repeated readings of each transcript (Schwandt, 2015), and weekly consultations with the research team. When all interviews were thus analyzed, we finalized a coding system through discussion with the entire research team. The coding system was then independently applied to each transcript by two researchers with disagreements resolved through discussion with the research team. Individual peer de-briefing and member checking with nine participants further enhanced the credibility of our interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These nine participants responded to our interpretations of their own interviews, method of analysis, coding system, and overall understandings of the experiences of faculty members.

**Institutional review board**

All research procedures were approved by the University IRB.

**Results**

**What do faculty experience as the salient features of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Participants identified several salient features that uniquely characterized their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in contrast to other emergencies such as 9/11, the AIDS crisis, and SARS. They described the COVID-19 pandemic as pervasive, sustained, isolating, dynamic, and embedded within a deeply divided sociocultural context. Similar to other crises, it also was described as having a disparate impact reflecting individuals’ positionality.

**Pervasive**

Twelve participants (75%) described the pandemic’s impact as “widespread,” and affecting “virtually everything that we do.” Steven, a tenured professor, described,

This has been an ongoing event that has changed every aspect of our lives. It changes how you go to the grocery store, it changes how you talk to your friends and family members, changes how often you do it, changes everything. I think it’s a question of how pervasively COVID has affected our personal lives, our careers, research, teaching, everything. It’s touched every part of our lives.

Similarly, Karen, a tenured professor and administrator, described,

It’s much more pervasive [than other crises]. It’s affecting all of us. I remember on 9/11 there were a number of students who had family members or acquaintances in the towers, but it wasn’t all of us, and when they lost a loved one they weren’t suddenly thrust into caregiving roles that they had never imagined. They were still able to come to classes.
Sustained

Five participants (31%) highlighted the sustained nature of the pandemic. As Helena, a tenured professor and administrator, observed,

> It even goes back to March, hoping that we would be back, somehow, magically, to normal. People would be upset every time there was a definite, “Okay, we’re not going to do summer school the same, we’re not going to do fall semester the same.” I think, partly, because it dashed people’s hopes that we were going to be back to some kind of normal.

Andrew, another tenured professor, described the impact on his scholarship:

> I think in those first few weeks, I thought that it would be over in maybe two or three months. And so I was still somewhat preparing my research for [when] things opened up again, or [when] it was safe to move forward. And so, I was still planning for the summer, but I think within a month or two of the pandemic, we knew that things were not looking too good.

Isolating

Eight participants (50%) noted that the pandemic isolated people from one another, inhibiting social connection and communication. As Helena summarized, “It got much more complicated to get work done. When we were all in a suite of offices together, we got a lot done just walking next door and talking to each other.” This isolation may have been particularly challenging for new faculty. Kris noted that not having colleagues to interact with in-person made daily tasks and transitioning to her new role much more difficult, “It’s very isolating. You know, not being able to ask questions when I have them, the kind of thing that if I were physically in the building with people, somebody would have looked at that with me and said, ‘Oh hey, here’s [how you do] this.’”

Dynamic

Ten participants (63%) also described the pandemic as rapidly changing, which made planning challenging and chaotic. Karen related,

> The first month was such a shock, in part because I was out of the country. I actually was in Europe when they shut down travel from Europe. So I had no sense of what was going on in the US. I knew nothing. Then what it ended up being for maybe the first month was just endless meetings trying to make sure that our students were okay. It was just chaotic. Students not being able to be in field, instructors who were so scared about Zoom. I think that at first it was just being reactive to everything. There was no planning, it was just reacting.
Sociocultural-historical context

All faculty members stressed that their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic were shaped within a deeply divided and contentious sociocultural-historical context including political unrest, systemic oppression, problematic national leadership, and economic hardship. Dana, a tenure-track professor, expressed, “I think the pandemic—on top of the Trump Administration, and economic woes similar to the Great Depression is a constellation. It’s almost catastrophic.” Similarly, Andrew described,

We’ve been through layers of crises, one on top of the other. COVID-19 has only been one layer. There was an existing environmental crisis, global warming, then there is the opiate crisis. Even before COVID-19 there was a crisis in terms of a federal administration that was inhospitable to social work values. That was almost more traumatic to me than COVID-19, and daily happenings in the news that were devastating to my values, and to everything that is meaningful to me as a person. Getting bludgeoned on a daily basis from that situation. And then, of course, George Floyd. And then, you know, election chaos, which continues to the present day. In some cases, COVID was secondary to those other happenings that we’ve been through, and it just keeps continuing.

Disparate impacts

Twelve participants (75%) stressed that the pandemic has not affected everyone equally. Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color (BIPOC) participants described assuming increased responsibilities for supporting their own communities, as well as additional roles at the school, university and state levels. Faculty members also voiced concern about the impact on those working towards tenure. Indeed, the work of Paul was affected by the closure of his toddler’s daycare: “My son was at home with me. So, it was rough. I would mostly work evenings and weekends when my wife was home from work because I was taking care of our son during the day.”

How have social work educators experienced the pandemic?

Participants also described their personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many described disorientation, fear/anxiety, loss/grief, fatigue, and strained personal and professional relationships.

Disorienting/surreal

Four participants (25%) described feelings of disorientation especially due to the absence of typical milestones such as graduations and holiday celebrations that mark the passage of time and important transitions. Kris described the loss of standard professional rituals:

I had this conversation with my friend who was in my [PhD] cohort. The two of us were the only ones that graduated and got jobs last year, and we were both just saying that it doesn’t
really feel real at all because our dissertation defenses were online, we didn’t have a graduation, and we just kind of started these jobs. It doesn’t seem real because it’s all virtual. It’s really hard to describe, honestly.

Helena described feelings of disorientation when returning, briefly, to her office:

I went back into my office in, I guess it was the last of August. So I hadn’t been in there since March. It’s a very odd sensation because it’s a little bit like science fiction, or Rip Van Winkle. It’s like everything stopped. People left things out on their desks because they thought they’d be back. Most of the plants were dead. It was just a very odd sensation.

**Fear/anxiety**

Seven participants (44%) also described experiencing fear and anxiety. Anxiety was felt by some educators in moving in-person classes to a virtual platform. Some faculty feared for their own safety or that of their loved ones. Sharon, a tenured professor, was on a Fulbright fellowship when one of her colleagues phoned her unexpectedly about a communication from the State department:

I was in the shopping center. I went straight to my email, and there was this letter from the State Department, “We’re concerned we can’t protect you. You need to go home immediately.” And I was in shock. So I started to cry. When we were allowed to walk to this [airport] gate, we saw people with masks, some of them even dressed in full [Hazmat] gear. And I was in shock. I was like, “Oh my god, this is real. This is real.” I think there were [only] 10 people on our [international] flight. And I got here [U.S.] and there was hardly anybody in the airport. It was like just, “Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.”

Participants also reported anxiety in relation to disrupted research programs as community partners shut down agencies, and face-to-face data collection was halted. Helena described stress when the university president directed faculty to stay away from campus, “It was harder for the ones who were saying, ‘I have to go back [to the university] because of my research.’” As the pandemic wore on, faculty members reported increased response time from journals leading to extended delays in publications especially concerning for Assistant Professors working towards tenure.

**Grief/loss**

Nine participants (56%) also experienced grief and loss both of opportunities, such as Sharon’s curtailed Fulbright fellowship, as well as deaths. Donna explained,

And then the horrible thing [that] happened is that we had two faculty members die last year. And just the whole idea that we lost [PROFESSOR] and couldn’t even go to her in-person funeral in any way, or talk much. It’s not how you want to say goodbye to a faculty member who everybody had a sense of an unfinished conversation with, and then she’s not there. So
the suddenness of it all. Mourning is distracting and makes it hard to concentrate. So I think I was less shy about telling my students, “Look, mourning affects concentration, and that’s why you’re all having a hard time getting stuff done.”

**Fatigue**

Three participants (19%) also described a cumulative impact as the pandemic continued. They described students, staff, and faculty at the school as being more “fatigued” going into the fall semester from prolonged virtual communication, and from dealing with the crises of the previous spring and summer. Tara reflected, “The fall felt very busy, and I think everyone came into [it] more fatigued from the pandemic and everything, more afraid. Students were describing being sick themselves, having family members who were ill, having family members who had died.”

**Relationship strain**

Additionally, four participants (25%) described remote methods of communication, such as Zoom and email, as more formal and rigid than in-person communications. They believed that the formality and distance of remote communications have strained faculty and student relationships making tensions and conflicts within the school more difficult to resolve. Jenna, a tenure-track professor described: “You build relationships by interfacing and interacting. It’s by existing in spaces with other people that we get to know each other.” Sharon explained,

[The ability to read] tone, vibe, body language, and openness, has changed [with remote] communication. It has changed relationship building. It has changed relationship maintaining. It has changed the kind of smiles that we might give to people in the building. It has changed how we learn from each other.

Participants also described how remote communications affect relationship building with and among students. Kathy, a tenure-track professor, explained,

I think in-person discussions are always more effective than conversations over Zoom or any sort of virtual platform. When the only space that [students] have to connect with one another [is] in these virtual Zoom classes, they haven’t had much opportunity to meet and really get to know one another.

**What opportunities for enhancing resiliency do faculty members identify moving forward?**

Participants described a variety of specific ways in which enhanced resiliency can continue to strengthen us moving forward, including in the face of future long emergencies. These included an extended reach for social work through technology, embracing
new opportunities to enact professional values of social and racial justice, and meaning making.

**Opportunities afforded by technology**

All 16 participants described opportunities afforded by new technology as a source of resiliency. They predicted that our increased facility with technology will create opportunities to improve accessibility in education, provide new tools for teaching and research, and present financial opportunities for institutions. Helena described,

> I think [technology] expanded the scope [of our reach]. There’s faculty, for example, who would never ever have used technology to teach, and they’ve been forced to think about how to do that, and to do it well. And faculty have done remarkable things that we never expected, and very creatively. One of the things I hear from faculty is that they can get somebody from anywhere in the country, anywhere in the world, to come in and talk to a class. And some of our faculty [already] did that, but now all of our faculty are starting to see what an advantage that can be.

Steve described a new facility with technology as an aid to his research moving forward:

> It helps my research, because now I’m able to interview people all over the state of Minnesota, just from my dining room table. And, because of COVID a lot of people I’m interviewing are adept at using Zoom. So, that helped a lot, and I probably wouldn’t have thought of using Zoom… I’ll send a calendar invite through Google, and the Google calendar will automatically populate a Zoom link, and poof I’m done. And then they [participants] get an automatic reminder.

**New opportunities to recommit to professional values and move forward the work of social and racial justice**

Four participants (25%) described their experiences as stimulating reflection and recommitment to their core values as social workers, and opening up new opportunities to enact those values through the work of social and racial justice. Rachel, an Assistant Professor, described an increased urgency to address inequities: “Our ethics and values haven’t changed, but I do think there is an increased attention to centering people with oppressed identities. It has given me a bit more urgency … that shifted for me.” Kris reflected,

> We definitely have had a light shown on systemic racism in the past year in a way that it hasn’t in my lifetime. I’ve never seen so many white people talking about racism! COVID shines a light in a different way. Broadens the circle of the flashlight you could say to where now we have to talk about these things in a connected way.
Donna described an opportunity for social work to become more globally focused and inclusive in its social justice work:

I think social work will become more global than it already is in response to this issue. And, you know, whose science? Whose knowledge? Should it be all publications coming out of well-funded, Ivy League-type places? How does that construct the world if that’s where it all comes from? How well do social service systems serve populations, how well do they listen, and how well do they see the problem? I think COVID really brings that into bold relief.

**Meaning making**

Gary, a Professor, explicitly stressed that coming through these difficult times can increase resiliency through meaning making. As he encapsulated,

I try to put it in some sort of perspective, try to give it some sort of meaning. Viktor Frankl went through living in a concentration camp, and he discovered that if you have meaning and purpose you can get through anything. So focusing on those kinds of things, it does lead to having greater compassion. Even if I haven’t walked in someone else’s shoes, I can better empathize with them. And I think it makes you a better researcher, too, frankly. At the most philosophical level, you never realize the value of something until you don’t have it anymore. So as much as people probably complained, “I have to go to this meeting. I have to see this person,” when you take that all away, you start to realize that there is some value to those annoying things. So my hope is that we become more thoughtful about how we all are connected to each other. How our actions impact others.

**What has changed for faculty entering year three of the pandemic?**

Entering year three of the pandemic, faculty described various responses. One professor described adjusting to what has felt like a new “normal” of working primarily from home, and routinely connecting with colleagues and students online. Others expressed increased frustration with the university administration, erosion of community, and a concern regarding the toll the pandemic is taking on individual well-being. More specifically, five participants, or 56% of those who updated their experiences, expressed increased dissatisfaction with university-level leadership. One professor described,

As the pandemic progresses and the university system moves in and out of safety measures, my main challenge stems from an overwhelming sense of not feeling cared for by my current academic institution. For instance, instructors were prevented from disclosing a positive COVID-19 case to classes if we were informed of a positive case by students. This “guidance” never sat well with me, especially knowing many of my students lived with vulnerable loved ones. The lack of strong public health measures has diminished my interest in being a part of the larger academic institution.

Another professor described,
I feel a fracturing of community over time. We have lost many long-term administrators and faculty, and with them a sense of institutional memory. I attend the zoom meetings [of faculty and staff], and realize that I don’t even recognize some of the faces and voices. We have not “on-boarded” faculty and staff with the usual traditions and, likewise, we have not bidden farewell to colleagues who are moving on. With this erosion of a sense of community also comes a loss of grace that we would ordinarily extend to one another, and small slights become exaggerated.

A professor with administrative responsibilities related,

I am really concerned about the mental and physical toll the pandemic is having on our students, staff, and faculty. Everyone is so fatigued right now. It is sometimes difficult for me to ask anyone to assist with routine tasks, let alone do more than usual, because the thought is overwhelming to them. The news about high infection rates, juggling complex caregiving responsibilities, or just trying to navigate classroom environments can create such anxiety and stress. I know things will get better, but right now most people’s tanks are close to empty. There is a bright side, however. I can see how we all are doing our best to support each other in this challenging time. Faculty and staff are providing backup for one another as needed, and they are being as flexible as possible with students. We are all in this together, and those acts of kindness give me a sense of hope.

Discussion

This study contributes to the existing research on the impact of the pandemic on higher education by focusing on social work faculty, considering challenges to both teaching and scholarship, and extending through the second year of the pandemic. We considered four research questions. First, what do social work faculty members experience as the salient features of the COVID-19 pandemic? Participants’ comments reflected social work’s person-in-environment, or ecological perspective. They described the pandemic as pervasive, sustained, isolating, dynamic, embedded within a deeply divided sociocultural context, and having a disparate impact related to individuals’ positionality. This characterization is consistent with our conceptualization of the COVID-19 pandemic as a long emergency.

Second, how have social work faculty members experienced their work during the pandemic? Social work faculty members play important roles in scholarship, education and service. Their continued well-being impacts these roles. Yet many described feelings of disorientation, anxiety, grief, fatigue, and strained relationships. Consistent with other research in higher education (e.g., VanLeeuwen et al., 2021), social work faculty also have demonstrated resiliency in maintaining quality education, scholarship and service.

Third, what opportunities for enhancing resiliency do social work faculty members identify moving forward? Social workers practicing within emergency rooms, alongside first responders, and in many other niches within our communities have begun to consider lessons learned for future pandemics (Manzanedo and Manning, 2020; Matto and Sullivan, 2021; Xiang et al., 2020). Faculty members in this study described a
strengthening of resiliency through innovative technology, embracing new opportunities to enact professional values of social justice, and meaning making. They describe this resiliency as central to moving forward through this current, ongoing long emergency, and those inevitably in our future.

Finally, what has changed for faculty heading into the third year of the pandemic? This research expands the existing research, which focuses on the initial transition to ERT, to faculty experiences through the pandemic’s second year. Over time, the challenges faculty have faced have taken a toll. Entering year three of the pandemic, many faculty experienced increased stress, as well as a fragmenting of community, and dissatisfaction with university leadership.

Limitations
Before considering implications, it is important to highlight a number of study limitations. First, we focused primarily on tenured and tenure-track social work faculty members. Future research needs to explore the experiences of field instructors, and other contract employees who also play key roles in preparing the next generation of social workers. Second, this study was conducted at a large, public, Research 1 University. Additional research should consult social work faculty members from diverse institutions whose experiences may not be reflected in this study. Finally, the longitudinal component of our design was limited to email discussions with nine tenured/tenure-track faculty members approaching calendar year three. Future research should thoroughly examine changes in faculty members’ experiences over time.

Implications
Faculty members’ reflections suggest pathways to increased resilience during this and future long emergencies. First, at the individual level, faculty members’ experiences of psychological distress, consistent with those reported in other areas of higher education, highlight the importance of tending to faculty well-being. More specifically, faculty members’ experience of sustained, involuntary social isolation has been a salient feature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation can be damaging to both mental and physical health (Biordi and Nicholson, 2013; Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014), especially in the broader context of the ongoing threat from the virus, social unrest, and other disruptions to everyday life. Individuals who report higher levels of social isolation also report feeling less connected to their communities, less career or work satisfaction, and decreased trust in larger systems (Clair et al., 2021). Universities can protect against these risks by increasing available mental health supports, temporarily reducing expectations for all faculty, and pausing the tenure clock for assistant professors through the pandemic.

Second, at the community level, participants expressed concern related to the maintenance of healthy communities within schools of social work. Prolonged, forced isolation and stress can degrade relationships and lead to the fraying of community as important community building traditions are suspended. These findings are of concern given that local communities are especially important in providing support during long...
emergencies when larger governing entities are overstretched (Orr, 2016). The development of innovative strategies to extend existing communities into the virtual environment and create new virtual communities should be prioritized. For example, a faculty member began a virtual “Supper Club” in which faculty sign up to share a meal with a colleague over zoom. Given participants’ expressions of increasing disconnection and disorientation as their colleagues retired and new colleagues on-boarded, all without formal orientations or celebrations due to the pandemic, administrators may consider allocating special time to reorienting the entire faculty and staff as pandemic safety restrictions abate. Such initiatives can provide faculty a continued sense of belonging and support among colleagues.

Finally, participants’ critical feedback at the administrative level intensified at the end of the second year of the pandemic. Participants underscored a need for clear communication and consistent guidelines at the school, college and university levels for responding to the pandemic. These perspectives are valuable for administrators as they lead and support their schools during the long emergency, and work to improve the recruitment, support and retention of social work faculty.

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Notes

1. All quotes have been lightly edited for readability.
2. All participant names are pseudonyms. Other identifying information also has been altered.

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