

Traci LaLiberte ([00:04](#)):

Hi, this is Traci LaLiberte and I'm the executive director for the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. And today I get the opportunity to speak a little bit with assistant professor Jessica Toft at the University of Minnesota. Jessica earned her PhD in 2005 and has been teaching and mentoring students ever since. In addition to the research that she has been doing. And much of what she does has great applicability to folks in the child welfare workforce. So we wanted to take a little time to talk about one of the areas that she does research in, um, in which we have a series of podcasts to follow on Neoliberalism it can be kind of a difficult topic to understand sometimes, but again, very applicable to child welfare. So welcome, Jessica.

Jessica Toft ([00:57](#)):

Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

Traci LaLiberte ([01:00](#)):

I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about what is Neoliberalism?

Jessica Toft ([01:08](#)):

This is a great question. And, first of all, I'm going to start off by talking about what it's not. Neoliberalism is not related to today's ideas of left leaning politics of liberals. Rather, it's liberal in Neoliberalism. This refers to the idea of Liberty and in this case, economic Liberty or freedom typically represented in the U.S. And the idea of free markets. So Neoliberalism is a new version of free market thinking that has big implications for the political and social life of all citizens and residents in the United States. So unlike old free market liberalism that said government should stay out of the business of business, not regulate them, Neoliberalism actually proposes that governments do get involved, but not by regulating markets, instead by regulating people and the systems that govern people like social work. Everyday people play an important role in Neoliberalism. First, they are the workers of markets in which to make profits.

Jessica Toft ([02:15](#)):

Second, they are the people who provide the daily caregiving of workers and would be workers like parents, especially the mothers. And third, the people in society play an important role in creating a social order that comes to accept and act out expectations of a Neoliberal vision. So Neoliberalism is the application of market logic to all arenas of life. And by market logic, that includes self-interests the idea of being interested in my own wellbeing. Our needs are satisfied only through transactional exchange with others, individual responsibility and a constant stance of competition. How do I make the most profit or the best return on nearly any exchange? And this logic is applied to the individual level, but it's also embedded in all the systems that are created to help people. So, because typically in social work, we work within nonprofit or state settings.

Jessica Toft ([03:18](#)):

Although some do work for for-profit settings, this looks like, this looks less like constant profit making and more like constant cost savings and efficiencies. So market and business principles are institutionalized in the delivery of social services. And this is seen and how social policies are designed, how state rules are crafted and how agency work is directed often through a business idea of contracts, by the way, in which outcomes and methods are preset and social workers who experience Neoliberal

managerialism in all contexts. And certainly child welfare work will have experienced an emphasis on efficiency, increased monitoring of their work and paperwork, applying sanctions and incentives onto workers, engaging in services. And actually this is played out in them, sanctioning, incentivizing their own clients and the standardization of practice, the practice methods and preset outcomes.

Traci LaLiberte ([04:22](#)):

Okay. There is a lot to unpack there. So let's think about for child welfare. What does this really mean? Because as I'm listening to you, it screams the child welfare setting in terms of how it's been created and how it's changed over the last 20 to 30 years. Right? The feds first created child welfare and said, Hey States, you have to have child welfare, go do it. And over time there have been rules and regulations and accountability measures that people have put in place with this idea of not just accountability, but efficiency and effectiveness and regulating the dollars. And we know that there's a lot that then gets connected to institutional racism who benefits from this, who doesn't benefit from this. So let's unpack that a little bit and talk about it. So when we think about Neo-liberalism today in child welfare, what do you think are some of the driving pieces that an individual worker, a day-to-day worker might be encountering?

Jessica Toft ([05:35](#)):

Yes. So at, well, I think first of all because Neoliberalism wants systems and social systems to work like markets, and this could be in the nonprofit sector. It could be in the state sector, certainly in the for-profit sector where we see social services some of these days. We will see systems set up so that practice is standardized. There's not much discretion in what you do. You have a few ways of responding to situations. You will see pressures, workers will be pressured to make quick decisions, speedy decisions. Workers will also be asked to limit the risks or exposure to risk that could imperil the system. So for workers, this means sometimes, this looks like maybe removing a child from family because of quote unquote risk in the moment, rather than thinking about protection and a longer frame or over time where you would be involved and build relationships and building systems of support. So you would see pressures for speed. You would see pressures for routinized work. You would probably see pressures to close cases. And also there would be pressures at the beginning of the system to not let in people in the front end because that would just increase the pressures on the system and all that, what the delivery of the system is supposed to look like. There's more to that, but that's a start.

Traci LaLiberte ([07:11](#)):

So what would Neoliberalism tell us, the study of Neoliberalism? What would it tell us about institutional racism or our profound disparities and disproportionality, which Minnesota struggles so desperately with?

Jessica Toft ([07:29](#)):

Neoliberalism is a stealthy son of a gun. I will say that, it's a political philosophy, so it's a big idea, but one of the ways that Neoliberalism works is to take the person, the citizen and say to them, instead of being a person with rights, you are an economic actor who has to earn your way. So narratives, racist narratives, misogynistic narratives, narratives that make people that position people as being totally responsible for their poverty, these work in tandem with Neoliberalism because they take away the claim for equality, the claim for rights based on being a member of a political community. So, the ideas of, let's take one of my areas of study has been welfare reform. So the temporary assistance for needy

families really got through Congress because it claimed that women who were receiving assistance were mostly women of color, which was not true, but then the racist tropes of dependency and being lazy.

Jessica Toft ([08:43](#)):

And all of those things came into play to promote the ideas that assistance was not a right of citizenship. So TANF actually took away a right of citizenship, which was entitlement to AFDC and made it now that people had to earn it through contract through work. And so this is what so racist narratives, narratives that say that women's work, caregiving work is not really work, also works for Neoliberalism because all of the parenting work and all of that care that goes into it and the hourly, and sweat that goes into it is not recognized. So in so that if that's not recognized and it looks like you're being lazy, the parenting is being lazy. And so that then puts you into the pressures of Neoliberalism and having to engage in low wage work.

Jessica Toft ([09:41](#)):

The ideas that people are individually responsible for their own poverty is another narrative that takes totally disregards history, social context, political influences. So, I think these things are seen in the child welfare system that we see more persons of color. We see women we tend to be caregivers, because they are put into the situations where they don't have those supports. They don't, they don't have the political power, they don't have the protection of middle income jobs, for example, which middle-income jobs provide healthcare, they help you build wealth, they help you buy homes. And so we see, instead those people who have been left out of societies, largess by, because of these systems, we see them in the child welfare system to a greater extent.

Traci LaLiberte ([10:39](#)):

So interesting the way that you're framing this, Jessica, and there's a three part podcast series, that's going to follow this introduction so people can really dig in and learn a lot more. But I do think it's really important to kind of think about two additional things. You know, one often a criticism by community members and advocates of child welfare is, you know, it's just a machine it's just to make money. The adoption network is just about, you know, pulling in more dollars. And I've often thought to myself, you know, I know a lot of child welfare professionals in the country, and nobody that I know is out in somebody's house saying, "well, that county's short on dollars we better, you know, remove some more kids". I mean, it, isn't a linear concrete kind of events that happens. But the Neoliberalism, as you're describing it accounts for what then is the outcome, because it's about protecting the system, it's that the system creates structure and a regiment that is in place and almost feels intractable as professionals graduate college, and they are, you know, ready to change the world and support kids and families and help people. They get into these systems that are just entrenched in some of these institutional ways. So am I getting that right? Is that along the right lines?

Jessica Toft ([12:11](#)):

Yeah, I think that's a really great point because we often like to do a cause and effect kind of analysis. Like there's an intention, and then this is the outcome of it, but you're so right that these are systems that have been put into place and they've been nurtured and they've been protected to have a societal order so that people play by the rules. And in fact, it's hard to even see it anymore because we are just parts of the system and we actually play a role in keeping the system going. And so what I, one thing I want to say to those new social workers and child welfare workers, is that systems are created. They're

a construct of humans. They, not that we necessarily realize it, but that also means that we can undo them. And one of the first ways to undo them is to unthink them.

Jessica Toft ([13:01](#)):

So we need to have new ideas to resist. And one of the things I love that Mimi Abramowitz says, and she's one of the last podcasts, is that thinking is practice and thinking in resistive ways and resistance is practice, and it's got to be our first way of being to raise our consciousness to see it. And then once we start to see it, we can come together in collective in community and our workplaces, within our schools and our classes, in our communities and talk about other ways. Re-imagine people as citizens with rights, and parents, as people with rights, rather than as subjects or clients who need to toe the line, you know, you need to follow the rules. And I think that would be, that's our first step.

Traci LaLiberte ([13:51](#)):

So interesting. That was the second thing I was going to bring up. And then I think we should wrap up so people can get into the meat of the podcast. But, you know, there has certainly been certainly for the last year, much more talk about the abolishment of police departments, again, as a systemic structure and in a parallel fashion, the child welfare system that goes so closely with that, right? It's often seen as a policing network or akin to the policing network. And many, many calls beyond just this year. I think of colleagues at Alia, an organization that has been trying to have conversations like this dismantling the system. We need a different system. The reform of system doesn't really seem to take enough change to really make a difference for kids and families. Similar to what you just said, that Mimi Abramovich said, you know, people come to the table to put into practice change, and it gets stuck.

Traci LaLiberte ([14:55](#)):

And so do we just need a different, do we need to build a different construct, get rid of the system that we have altogether. And it's very controversial. Alan Dettlaff is talking about this a lot in the field of child welfare as well. And I think it makes people nervous. They don't really know what to do with that. Do we really get rid of it if we get rid of it what does that mean for the safety and protection of kids? Well, also holding that balance of, we know it isn't serving kids and families in all cases to the best of our ability. So what would you say about that? You know, the dismantling of the system that some people are calling for.

Jessica Toft ([15:40](#)):

Yeah. This is a wicked problem as they say. And, I think about, like you think about this is going to seem an odd analogy, but think about gambling, casinos. The house will always win, right? You set up a system where the house will always win. And I think about child welfare, some ways, the way that it's structured right now, the house, the system that will always with appearance don't really have a chance in the long run. And the other hand, if you totally dismantle it, there's also a lack of support for families and the ways that they have been getting support, and also children are left in a tough situation. So I think there has to be a, both/and happening, in my perspective, a both/and of some kind. And it is a wicked problem.

Jessica Toft ([16:30](#)):

So I'm not going to pretend like I know the answer to this necessarily, but I do know that right now, it feels like it's a casino mentality, and we have to, we have to alter it and change it. And we have to get the concept of history and time and not just immediate risk. It has to be a long haul. It can't be just the

here and now we have to see this in past, and we have to see it in the future. And if we can start thinking about it in that way, maybe we can give ourselves enough space to do a both and.

Traci LaLiberte ([17:03](#)):

Well, it's interesting that you say that because I think that child welfare's history, our history as a field has been this dichotomous, you know, we protect children or we preserve families. And the reality is protecting children and preserving families goes together, preserving families is protecting children, right. We need to look at these things in an integrated way, not an either or so, as you're talking about it. Yes, perhaps it is a different system, but it's a system that's built to do all of those things along a continuum, rather than pitting a parent against a child, which is never what we want to be doing. It's not helpful.

Jessica Toft ([17:47](#)):

Yes. And I will just say one last thing. This is not about the child welfare system really. It's about our political system, our political economic system. And that's where I think that the abolitionist movement really has a great point, that we have to first have a good political economic system where people actually have a chance to win at the casino all the time. And it shouldn't be a casino by the way, it should be a lot less risk. And maybe we're seeing some visions of it here with a new administration, et cetera, child poverty cut in half. If we had housing, if we had healthcare, if we had economic solvency, imagine we probably, the child welfare system would be a lot smaller than it is today.

Traci LaLiberte ([18:30](#)):

You have given us a lot to think about, and this has been well, this is great. Cause I think that once you get into the other podcasts, things kind of, you start getting really deep into it and, having this as a base for being able to understand those conversations, and again, kind of the pinnacle kind of ending with Mimi Abramovich who is certainly a rock star in our field of child welfare and somebody that we have great admiration and respect for. It's a great series. So thank you for developing this series. Thanks for spending some time chatting with me to kind of orient people to this and we look forward to working with you more.

Jessica Toft ([19:11](#)):

Thank you. And I just want to thank the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, because this is a, it's a tough, it's a tough topic. So it takes some courage to take it on, but it is a really important topic. And I'm so excited that we're doing this here. So thank you very much Traci, for this opportunity,

New Speaker ([19:31](#)):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.