

Jessica Toft ([00:05](#)):

Welcome everyone. This is Jessica Toft. And I want to thank you for joining us for our first podcast and our series of three related to neoliberalism's impact on social welfare and social work practice in the United States with an emphasis on child welfare work. Today, we will discuss the concept of neoliberalism focusing on those aspects that are most important to social work and social welfare. In this podcast, I'm joined by PhD candidate, Ruti Soffner-Elnekave, as we discuss and define this concept.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([00:38](#)):

Jessica, I've learned a lot about neoliberalism in the past two years in connection to social welfare and social work. And I just wanted to start by asking you what got you interested in neoliberalism.

Jessica Toft ([00:51](#)):

You know, I have been a professor of social work for many years now, and I've taught a number of social welfare history courses and policy courses and research courses in masters and DSW and now PhD courses. And I have become interested in this because I see that it's a really important social force at this point in social work's history. And it became, more concrete to me. I was the president of the Minnesota Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. And we would have you know, gatherings conferences, workshops, presentations, and so many social workers would come to me and say, my work life is, really difficult. I'm feeling really stressed out I'm overworked, you know, what can you do as a professional association? And, I, it was, so prominent. I thought there's something there's something going on here.

Jessica Toft ([01:53](#)):

And I have always been interested in my research agenda has always been interested in topics related to vulnerable groups, disenfranchised groups, the poor, persons who have been, disenfranchised, persons of color women, issues of gender and race together. I also, in my research, I was interested in how political discourse is a social force and how it can be used to shape our understanding of people and their problems and even shape what we should do about them. And these things together along with sort of the rise of social workers doing more and more and more one-on-one kind of practice instead of community and macro practice, work, really had me thinking about what was happening. And so when I started hearing about neoliberalism and its forces, I thought this is, this is it. This is the thing that's shaping all of these pieces. And you know, I'm, I am just old enough, so that my early professional career, when I worked at a group home and a youth shelter was really before neoliberalism took a hold, I think of social welfare provisioning. And so I've seen a change over time in my own professional work. So that's how I got into this, topic.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([03:22](#)):

Yeah, that's very interesting. But now liberalism is really a very big word and I think most of us don't fully understand it if at all. Could you explain what it means for us in general or how might it be related to child welfare work?

Jessica Toft ([03:40](#)):

Right. Well, it is related to child welfare work, but I have to start back a little bit, first of all, I will just say that we are not the only ones where this is a difficult term to understand, in fact, nearly every article that talks about the intellectual tradition or the history of this term. We'll start off with a phrase

something like neo-liberalism is difficult to define, and that will be, it's just something that they start off that way. But one thing I think helps right off the bat is to say what it's not, it is not liberalism. Like we think about it, it's, you know, it's not sort of that, left wing stance about, you know, social welfare, and that kind of, perspective. And it's not even the more classical political liberalism that political scientists think about, which is the idea that individuals should, there should be a protection of the freedom of the individual, you know, and, individual autonomy was all important.

Jessica Toft ([04:40](#)):

So it's not those things. And so I just want to say that off the bat, because I think it's hard for us in our day and age to get, especially that social liberalism out of our head. But, I will, I'm going to give you a really quick brief description that I'm then going to unpack a little bit to help us at least have an idea to start with. So neo-liberalism, it's a governing principle and the idea is that it's the governing principle that endorses free markets by reducing business regulations and withdrawing welfare state protections. So it's a combination of an economic idea and a political and social idea, that go in tandem with one another. And what I will say is about before, I'm not going to spend much time with the economical economic piece of it because others do that very well.

Jessica Toft ([05:40](#)):

But one thing about neoliberalism to know, as you know, a person on this earth is that it's not the same thing as laissez faire economics, uh, which is something that we, a lot of us have heard about. So it's not the idea that just leave the markets alone and, um, get the government out of there. And then they're just kind to thrive and survive. We just, you know, government is, is damping them down. Yeah, it's not that, in fact neoliberal is understand that markets have to be tended and supported and protected. And so we need policies for those things. So for example, corporate tax breaks, government subsidies, or even bail outs, as we know about from the great recession of 2008, these are things, that this is economic policy, where it, so it's not a laissez faire idea. It's a, we need to protect markets and tend them and support them almost as though it was a person or an entity, you know in our mind.

Jessica Toft ([06:42](#)):

So neoliberalism does require those kinds of policies, but in order to work it also requires change in the political and the social and the cultural fabric of society in order to support markets. And this is where social work comes into play. So part of it was to free markets and the other part was to withdraw the welfare state protections. So this would mean limiting things like worker protections, for example. So, limiting the power of unions. Limiting access to healthcare, limiting food support and family, and even family assistance. For example, markets thrive better when they have access to low wage flexible work, especially in a globalized economy. So these policies have freed up these workers and laborers from what had been social protections that have made them more available to markets. And, you know, a major example of this in social work would be when we think about the aid to families for dependency children that was then rescinded and replaced by the temporary assistance for needy families.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([08:02](#)):

That's TANF right?

Jessica Toft ([08:03](#)):

That's TANF, right. So AFDC is what we used to call, you know, and that came out of the Social Security Act of 1935 after the Great Depression. One of the great bedrocks of our Social Security was that

program. And it was an entitlement attached to citizenship. And, but with TANF no longer is that an entitlement instead, this idea of a right, a social right of citizenship and entitlement was reworked to be a contract. So that in order to receive this under TANF, you as a low-income often woman, with children, single woman with children, a mother with children would have to engage in paid work in order to receive this right of citizenship benefit. We can and that's, uh, that's a really clear maybe signature neoliberal policy that we can see that it's impacted a lot of folks in social work and social welfare. But if I can continue. I'd like to do a little bit more about the political and the social and the cultural, cause I think that this is where it gets so important for social work, but it's so hard to kind of understand it because there's so many layers to it. So are you okay?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([09:21](#)):

Yes, definitely. We'd love to hear more about the political and social structures around it.

Jessica Toft ([09:27](#)):

One of the things with the United States and like many other Western democracies is that after World War Two, Keynesian Economics came into play. So you don't have to know what that is, except for it meant that a lot of these industrialized Western democracies put into place really robust welfare states because they realized that workers were vulnerable to capitalism that there was that, and they'd lived through world war and they'd lived through great depressions and they wanted to have some kind of protections in place. So you cannot tear down this kind of social solidarity sort of policy overnight. And what Wendy Brown says, who's really the best known political philosopher on neoliberalism is that you need a political reasoning that can really resonate with a population that can start to sort of supplant this idea over time. And in fact, what Brown says is that the reasoning, the political reasoning that is overshadowed, this idea of citizen protections is the idea of the market.

Jessica Toft ([10:36](#)):

This is a really powerful idea. Margaret Somers and Fred Block talk about that. This is a 200 year old ideology, the United States, this idea of a work ethic and that this individual individualism kind of work ethic was sort of reworked into a political reasoning where all aspects of our life. And this is what the neoliberals thought about all aspects of our lives should be thought of in terms of a market or a model of a market. So this means that the individual who had been thought about as a political actor or a social actor should really be reduced to only an economic actor. And some of these ideas will sound maybe familiar to you and to others. The idea that individuals should be self interested and that the rational, you know, if we have all the information, we can make the decisions that we need, and if we have that, then we should also be individually responsible so that we should be able to choose the optimal course of action, given all the information we have.

Jessica Toft ([11:37](#)):

And so therefore if we're making our choices, we should have to bear all the risk on the outcome of those choices. But what this does is an economic scales. It puts us in a role of being entrepreneurs on every aspect of our life. We have to assess the best return on every social encounter. We're constantly in competition with ourselves, improving ourselves with our, with our coworkers, our children competition, you know, little bits of human capital, a little piece of human capital. So interactions in a neoliberal frame become really just contracts. They become transactional, it's a quid pro quo their exchanges. And this is how our needs need to be, need to be fulfilled. But what this creates of course, is that we know in real life that we can't assume all responsibility and risks without that real sense of

insecurity because there's so many things that are sort of out of our control or feel like we don't have you know, full control over.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([12:39](#)):

So the whole social contract is marketized. It's about money and getting better and getting the best results rather than being there for one another.

Jessica Toft ([12:51](#)):

Yeah, It's, it is. It's about the idea that if I do this for you, then you're going to give me that and, at least in our social interactions and that's, that's our exchange. Thank you very much. And we, we go on our way. And when you think about social provisioning, you'll see contracts play a big role in social provisioning, because this is Neo liberal thinking on the administrative level, the state level to our nonprofits are about contracts now and performing in a certain way and doing more for less, contracts are also about how agencies then relate to their workers, and their social service providers, because they have contracts they need to meet. So they need to make sure that their workers are falling in line and they're doing the things they need to do in order to meet these contracts.

Jessica Toft ([13:46](#)):

So it is, it does start to rework many of our relationships in the social world into forms of contracts and exchanges and quid pro quos. You know, what also it does, is it replaces an idea of something that we don't really put in the front of our mind is that the idea of the social and the public and the collective and shared risk, you know, the underlies welfare states, think about public schools in the last, you know, number of decades. We've had such a difficult time getting health insurance, but even, you know, the Affordable Care Act is really under siege right now that was, you know, trying to expand this idea of collective risk. So these ideas of the political and social and the democratic citizen has really been replaced by economic entrepreneur. And in fact, Wendy Brown says we're all Neoliberals now, in fact, it's so we're so saturated with it. It's like the water we in, we can't even, it's hard for us to imagine something else. So, this is tough for social work.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([15:00](#)):

No, that's interesting because you're saying that we don't see it anymore, and we're all sort of socialized into this way of political reasoning and way of thought. So how can we even identify it then?

Jessica Toft ([15:18](#)):

Well, I think, you know, as you start to, I think it's sort of like the matrix, you know, you take the blue pill, you take the red pill and once you start to understand the political reasoning of neoliberalism, you can start to see it. And this is one of the things about ideologies is that they're powerful when they're hidden, they become less powerful, when they are made more explicit. And when we can see the tools of operation at play, so to speak, think about language, for example. In our social services we've talked about the people we work with as consumers quite a bit. We, people have to reach you know, goals. They have performance contracts, they have client contracts of different kinds. This language that has been borrowed from economics and business has been sort of quietly put into place and supplanting ideas of social welfare practice of wellbeing and health and holistic approaches and those sorts of things. So it's, so that's one of the ways that I think that we can start to think about it is to actually to start to think about our language. And yeah, it's a, it's a good beginning.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([16:36](#)):

Okay. Thank you. So we were talking about how we might recognize it in general, but how can we see the principles of neoliberalism in social policy?

Jessica Toft ([16:50](#)):

So I'm making the claim that, you know, social work has been Neoliberalized. How does, what does that look like? You know, so, if the political reasoning is that personal responsibility and accountability and those sorts of things, we can see that, for example, just in the TANF example that we talked about, personal responsibility is actually, was so prominent during the 1990s with the Contract for America. That was like the most frequently stated phrase. And it's embedded into that policy, the ideas of personal responsibility, but we can see it in all different kinds of social service policies today. We also see ideas of market and business principles are applied to the delivery of social services. So, the idea of, of being productive efficient, and, you know, not wasting a single dime of taxpayer money. And in fact,

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([17:55](#)):

But isn't that, isn't that a good thing. Like we are paying all this tax money for social welfare services, and we do want the services to be efficient and to get the results that are in the public's best interest. So if the services are more efficient, isn't that a good thing?

Jessica Toft ([18:13](#)):

See, this is a, this is a key point. Efficiency is also a Neoliberal idea, and that it's a factory term. It's a way of thinking about how quickly can you do something? The question for me is partly effectiveness and partly humaneness. As human beings, how are we as social workers addressing the problems of living of human beings? Is that an efficiency calculation is a important question for us. Now, I'm not saying that we should just spend money, however we want to as social services. But I do think we need to have a conversation about what are the goals of a service that are really about social rights of citizenship. People are accessing these services because they are a citizen and they are looking for assistance. So whose goals are we serving if we're just being efficient, rather than thinking about what is it that this family really needs to function and do well, and to do well on their own terms.

Jessica Toft ([19:22](#)):

I mean, you know, they have to have some say they have to have some autonomy themselves and how they are being acted upon. So, I think that we need to challenge the idea of efficiency without any other kind of rubric of what is it, what are you trying to achieve? What is, what is it with the people that you're working with are trying to work towards? Other part about neoliberalism is that it's, it's an devolution of responsibility, so no longer do we have as many programs that are administered from a federal level, which would have kind of an equalizing pressure on social programs and how they are dispensed. When we devolve responsibility down to lower levels of government, you have much different kinds of provision of social welfare policies. So people in certain parts of the country who maybe are not well-funded, or maybe don't support social services, are getting very little service, maybe very restricted service, maybe you certain, maybe there's a different kinds of maybe more disciplinary services than in other parts of the country. Also just the privatization of public goods. We, this now is how we provide a great amount of our social services or some is through some kind of privatizing mechanism usually through performance contracts of all kinds.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([20:51](#)):

Can you maybe give an example for that to make it clearer?

Jessica Toft ([20:55](#)):

Yeah. So we think about, let's say providing mental health services, for example. So that is a service that is contracted, you know, the state works with HMO's and they come up with, the State basically gives over some of its governing responsibility to these HMO's who then work with agencies and set up contracts saying, you need to provide, you know, this service, this much service for this much money. And there's all kinds of stipulations that you know, HMO's, or third party payers can put into these contracts. But what it tends to do is it tends to give a lot of power to the payer of services and less power to the provider of services. And it gives pre it pressurizes to lack of a better word, non-profits and even for-profits to do more with less. And so, you know, 50 minute, mental health hour for this much money. And in fact, not only are we going to tell you how much money you can get, but you can only use these services, these kinds of interventions. And sometimes, you know, these will be based on ideas like best practices or evidence-based, but it tends to, limited what you can do and how much you can do at, for based on in contract metrics. Yeah.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([22:32](#)):

And if I understand correctly, there's also more and more for-profit agencies that are getting these contracts and actually making profits by providing social services for marginalized peoples.

Jessica Toft ([22:48](#)):

Right. That's, it's an interesting question about we've we do have for profits now in human services. And I'm actually not sure how much they've grown, but they're a significant part at this point of social services and for-profit organizations are, their goal is to make a profit and the way you make a profit is by lowering pay, and by increasing, you know productivity. And so, that you, it really does call into question, you know, what, what kinds of services are provided or not allowed maybe under those conditions?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([23:24](#)):

Yeah. And I guess the, one of the biggest examples are prisons today.

Jessica Toft ([23:28](#)):

Yes. Minnesota had private prisons for a little bit, and then it would, actually I'm not totally hip on the latest with private prisons, but they were, I do believe they were, that the state legislature made them illegal and, you know, but that, they are definitely around the country and we've got detention centers and yeah, a lot of for-profit you can imagine that definitely would be an ethical issue, minefield, if you will.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([23:59](#)):

Okay. So getting back on track here. So we were talking about privatization of public services and some of the principles of neoliberalism and social policy. So understand one more way that we see that is through managerialism. Could you say something about that?

Jessica Toft ([24:21](#)):

Yeah. So managerialism in social services is become, uh, it's a neoliberal idea, and it's the idea of taking business practices of management from the for-profit section and, and applying them in human service agencies and organizations, et cetera. So what this means is, we are, we see within social service agencies, a real infusion of a culture of competition, incentives and sanctions are often part of the performance review. So if you see more people, or if you engage more clients in a period of time than what your goal was, you might actually get an increase in pay. On the other hand, if you see fewer than what your goal is, you might actually get a decrease in pay or maybe more oversight or, you know, things like that. So, this idea, it's a pressure that puts workers in a position of having to really try to get through their caseload which is, can be a conflict of interest at time.

Jessica Toft ([25:40](#)):

If what you're, what you're needing to do with the family takes more than just, you know, 50 minutes. And it also limits your purview about what is in your domain of social work practice. Can you do, can you get engaged in advocacy, for example, which is part of our code of ethics. That's a real question. Other pieces about managerialism is just that, that constant monitoring and tracking the paperwork. The, where are you the monitoring piece of it, and the checking in on what workers are, what workers are doing and how efficient they're being. And in fact, the efficiency piece is really a cornerstone of neo-liberalism and especially in social provisioning, being productive and being efficient. But you know, these practices also tend to limit then what we can do with social workers.

Jessica Toft ([26:40](#)):

It limits our range of practice and it standardizes practice, manualizes it, as a matter of fact.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([26:48](#)):

So we become technicians,

Jessica Toft ([26:49](#)):

Yes, we become technicians. Why, you know, as long as you can say the words and, you know, and do you know, you can assess enough and say the word you can, you can do this. And in fact, it's one of the down pressures of the skilling, social work, social workers are not getting, they're getting paid less than nurses, certainly less than teachers these days. And, we're having a tough time asserting our professional authority. So, this is something that we really need to pay attention to as child welfare workers and social workers who are child welfare workers, and all social workers. And then finally with managerialism one last thing I want to say is that it, the performance evaluation is often, as I mentioned earlier, preset to goals that management has already decided are important, probably due to the contract they've received with, you know, with the state whoever's funding them or their funder doesn't have to be the state. And so they are constantly working maybe to an end goal that is maybe not what the client wants, or maybe even sometimes with the social workers think might not be the best, the, the best method or the best way or approach about going or the best outcome for the family. Um, so this is a real, this is an important aspect I think about managerialism is that it challenges the professional authority of in our case, social workers and child welfare workers.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([28:19](#)):

And we're monitored a lot of times by directors that are not social workers.

Jessica Toft ([28:24](#)):

Yes. It would be, that is true. We hear about a lot of nonprofits, especially who had once had been housed, you know, staffed by social workers. And now we have a, we've got a lot more MBAs and public manager, you know, folks in those positions.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([28:48](#)):

So what we've talked about, it sounds like that not just clients and general citizens in the society are living at under now liberalism situations and have to be entrepreneurs, but also social workers and child welfare workers, like you just said,

Jessica Toft ([29:06](#)):

Yeah, you know, this is it's as a political reasoning. Neoliberalism doesn't have any fences, it can roam where it wants to. And, um, because it, it, uh, does, um, assist at market ideology, it's applied to social workers too. We do see this competition among co-workers. How well are you doing as an individual worker individuals becoming more and more responsible for how well their clients do is as though workers have control over all aspects of their lives. So we, you know, we in child welfare work, we also, um, try to even just minimize risk and, you know, risk minimizing risk is a big, is a big deal. But part of that comes back to this neoliberal idea that it's a risky world and because you're responsible for it, you're going to try to minimize it as much as possible.

Jessica Toft ([30:03](#)):

And when you think about it, sometimes the best course of action with the family is not to make the least amount of risk, but it's to optimize the best possible outcomes. You know, it might not always be the best way to promote the wellbeing for a family. If a family has some risk factors, you can pull a child from that family, but that might not be the best thing for the child. It might be the least risky thing for the system. So there's some, those are some really difficult questions, but I know the child welfare workers who are listening, probably recognize that as something that they've run up against. But also,

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([30:43](#)):

There's liability concerns here, right?

Jessica Toft ([30:45](#)):

Yes, liability. Again, it's that part of the responsabilizing workers what once had been maybe more of a state or agency, you know, kind of a risk or something that would just, you know, part of life has risk in it, it's now become all the risk has been pushed down towards the frontline worker. A lot of it, not all of it, but, I, uh, so, um, I would say that this is really for social workers all around it's, it's also created just sort of a state of insecurity and risk and like, you can't make mistakes. I think it limits our ability to think creatively and to be fully engaged with our client in a way that on a human to human level, because we are concerned about other outcomes, other aspects

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([31:37](#)):

But one might argue that rightfully so, especially in an area like child welfare and child protection, we need to be super careful and super accountable for every step we do in child welfare. So what would be other ways to think about social work practice that don't involve accountability or responsabilization.

Jessica Toft ([31:58](#)):



Right. Well, you know, there's a real question here about whose risk is, you know, there, depending on who you are in society, if you are a impoverished person, maybe a person of color, you are going to be, uh, more exposed to the systems that see risk. If you are a fairly privileged and middle-class person, you're going to be less exposed to those systems that see risk. And there's studies that have demonstrated, you know, when an African-American family or a family of color go to the emergency room, and there's a bruise. They're more likely to be called into question for child protection compared to a white family. Um, you know, so, and then children of color are more likely to go to public schools than private schools, are more likely to be seen by. So, some of the, to get back to your question about risk.

Jessica Toft ([33:02](#)):

Is what's the risk about? Is the risk about the child, or is the risk about the system sort of protecting, it's protecting itself maybe from legal action and et cetera. And the, I mean, the risk for the child might be that they're gonna, they're gonna lose that connection and attachment with their family and their parents is another risk. The only risk isn't harm, which is a serious risk I'll grant you that, but there's a lot of risk in white middle-class families too. And we don't seem to be as concerned about that. This is sounding pretty radical, so I'm not sure if we want to put this in the podcast, but I do think that we need to think about when we're using that word risk, what are, what's the risk of taking a child away who maybe doesn't, who might end up having trauma from being taken away from a family from family?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([34:00](#)):

No, and I think social workers are concerned with that for sure. And are weighing risk all the time.

Jessica Toft ([34:09](#)):

Right. I mean, life has got a lot of risk in it also, but, know I understand, I mean, I don't want to make light of children who are in dangerous situations. I used to teach a Child Abuse Prevention Studies class. And, so there are many variables, but some of this risk, if we're really concerned about risk, we should be thinking about housing. You know, we should be thinking about enough food on the table. We should be thinking about a living wage. You know, if we're really concerned about risk of these children, let's start thinking about, let's start thinking upstream, right.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([34:43](#)):

So how, how might be, How might we be thinking about other ways for social work practice and child welfare practice?

Jessica Toft ([34:52](#)):

So, I mean, let's, let's talk about professional authority. You know, in social workers. Yeah. I mean that, you know, how, how much, how we struggled for professional authority in the beginning of the 20th century, and you know, professions. And we got it. I mean, it was granted to us. We have licensing board, we've got the Council of Social Work Education. We have the National Association of Social Workers, Society for Social Work and Research. We have the Boards of Social Work. We have, we do have professional authority and, but what comes with that is a responsibility. And so this is maybe what I think we need to start thinking about is we have to understand that the public is granting us as social workers, substantial autonomy and discretion because our work is really complex. We have to go to school and get advanced education.

Jessica Toft ([35:44](#)):

It requires specialized knowledge. We have a code of ethics that we need to abide by. We have professional supervision to ensure that in the field, I mean, and these are, this is years of supervision when you're in your program. And then afterwards by a licensed social worker to make sure when you run up against these difficult situations that you have consultation and somebody you can talk about, who is a professional social worker. Doctors, engineers, attorneys, these people are all part of a professional class of people who have had these similar kinds of experiences and social workers fall into this too. And so, I think that we should think about ourselves in that way and think about us, ourselves as practicing within our professional authority, our complex understanding. And when you think about it, there's hardly a profession that's more complex and difficult than social work. Engineers, you know, they're, the, what they work on is inanimate and it doesn't move.

Jessica Toft ([36:51](#)):

Like, you know it doesn't have thoughts and feelings. It doesn't move around. It doesn't have a life that it has to control outside of its calculations. And even doctors who were, you know, working on bodies and people, it's a different thing. And social work, not only are we working with people who have really complex problems, but they're living in a society that has a very complex impacts on them. So it's hard for me to think of another profession that has a more difficult, decision-making and calculus to do than social work. And we need to be able to use our full range of capacity in order to do that.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([37:31](#)):

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I know you've been in research for a long time about this topic. What has been done and the effects of managerialism and neoliberalism and social work practice?

Jessica Toft ([37:43](#)):

Yeah. You know, I have been working with a group, chair, that the, Neoliberal Impacts on Social Work Practice Group at the University of Minnesota. And we have done a scoping review of all of the literature on the effects of neoliberalism on social work practice in the United States. And what's interesting is that almost all the other Western democratic countries and other countries around the world use the term neoliberalism and they understand it much better than we do here in the United States. So they're sort of, I think ahead of us. So doing the scoping review was sort of helpful for us to get an idea of like, how much do we know, and, you know, there were only 132 articles, which is for over 40 years, that's really not all that much. And it's about different aspects of it. But, in terms of looking at the idea of neoliberalism, or even managerialism in social work practice, there's really one study that stands out and not many others that do as full or comprehensive of a job. And that would be Mimi Abramovitz. A lot of social workers will know her cause they read her work.

Jessica Toft ([38:53](#)):

Her social welfare historian and public policy welfare scholar. She and her colleague, Jennifer Zelnik, conducted a survey in New York city with a number of agencies of different kinds. And, about half of them were licensed social workers. And there were about, there were a total of 3000 total respondents about half of them were.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([39:19](#)):

Wow.

Jessica Toft ([39:19](#)):

That's a lot. But only about a half of them are licensed social workers. But what they did find was that they, that managerialism, the pressures of managerialism, neoliberal managerialism were negative, negatively affecting their work. The pressures of efficiency and productivity were impacting their relationships with clients. They started, they were wondering about the ethical decisions they had to make. They felt like their workloads were increasing. And in fact, we, they have agreed to come and talk with us at a later podcast on that, It's very exciting.

Jessica Toft ([39:56](#)):

And in our next podcast, before I forget Ruti, we're going to be talking about, how neoliberalism based on that scoping review. We looked at, we pulled out child welfare, especially how neoliberalism is specifically impacting child welfare services. So the next time we talk, we'll be able to talk about the impacts that what we know in research so far.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([40:19](#)):

That will be interesting.

Jessica Toft ([40:20](#)):

Yeah. I think that Will be interesting. It'll be interesting for this audience to hear. You know, maybe they're, maybe they're sensing that there, that this is happening to them, but, at other than this large scale survey, there's been very little done and there's been little done on this idea of professional authority, especially social work, licensed social work, professional authority, and how that should be able to resist a business managerialism, you know, with a code of ethics with a licensing board, with our years of education, and we should be able to muster some kind of resistance to a pressure that makes us practice in a way that we don't feel really, abides by what we know and what we believe in, in our code of ethics. And so I will just tell the listeners now that we are planning as a next step in our neoliberal project to do a statewide survey of all licensed social workers, about the impacts of neoliberalist managerialism on their practice. And we're going to look at professional authority and other aspects of their work to see what kind of relationships we can find.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([41:29](#)):

Well, that was interesting to talk about this, is there anything else would like to add, or does it feel like there's so much, we just started understanding what this means?

Jessica Toft ([41:39](#)):

Yeah. We've just scratched the surface, but I hope that the listeners have gotten a taste of this. And, one thing I will say is that neoliberalism, was, it was an idea that really began in, um, back in the forties with the Mont Pelerin Society. And they were, self-consciously aware that they were playing a long game. They had a political idea that needed to be sort of nurtured and, you know, with think tanks and, you know, et cetera, and what we need now as social workers and child welfare workers, people who work with human beings, who care about, you know, that is to have a different political reasoning that we can push back on these ideas. And I would say that democratic ethics would be the one and that's what Wendy Brown would say. And, and other political philosophers would say that we need to think and resurrect an idea of democratic ethics in our in our practice and in the way I think we are in the world and our communities and as citizens and, and political beings.

Jessica Toft ([42:46](#)):

And, so democratic ethics that doesn't just immediately, there, aren't just the list of things that come to mind. So I'm going to name some things to help us kind of, nurture again, this, these ideas. So the idea that there's equal moral worth of each person so that there is no, no people are more important than other people in our society And that we all have the right to have rights. And in nation states, that usually means citizenship rights. Um, but we have human rights or another concept that we have that can be, that can push back too. In democracies, a cornerstone is that it's ruled by the people for the people. So that means that the laws and the rules we create should be subject to change by its members, its societal members. Also, ordinary people can become elected leaders, social workers, you can run for office, you can become a leader who can help think and instill these kinds of ideas.

Jessica Toft ([43:52](#)):

Also that, ideas of freedom are important, which is, you know, something that, you know, individual freedom is important. It's important, not just in terms of getting the government off of me, but also having the government support me enough that I can actually engage my other rights so that I haven't, but I can engage politically that I can engage. Um, you know, socially that I can engage my civil rights, of you know, access to a free attorney and those sorts of things. I need enough as a citizen to be able to do that. Also as citizens, we need to have a moral reflection. We need to be able to think about other people as moral human beings and we have to follow our conscience. So rather than a, than a thing to get off the plate, you know, off your desk or as a, as an entity to, you know, something to get completed, we do have to think about what if I were they, you know, what, what, how, how am I treating this person as a human being?

Jessica Toft ([44:56](#)):

And you know, we should have equal protection under the law. We should all be have, you know, there, there's an idea that, you know, treating everybody equally is, actually can kind of promote inequality when you have differences in history. But I think today we're even, we're, we, we treat people unequally still to this day, we think about prison systems and incarceration. So we need to think about how are we equally protecting people and then move ourselves into how do we promote equity? And we all have political, civil, social, and economic rights. And those things are what make us political agents, not economic, but political agents and our society. And we should think about one another that way it has, as we would like to be thought of I think. So those are some of my big lofty ideas.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([45:56](#)):

But I think it does give an alternative of thinking about social provision and social work practice rather than what we heard here about now liberalism. So thank you.

Jessica Toft ([46:09](#)):

Yeah. And just one last thing I will say is that I do think social workers have some of the most complex jobs today and they actually, I think are, were symbolic were a symbol of this tension between Neoliberalism and democracy, because we are the ones who are coming face to face with vulnerable people, vulnerable citizens. And we are citizens ourselves or we're or residents or people with rights to. And, so social work is sort of like unlike any other profession in this way. And, and I think it's important for us to take a step back and really think about how do we want to be in the world, given our important role working with all kinds of disadvantaged people.

Ruti Soffer-Elnkave ([46:57](#)):

Yes, definitely. Super, super important. Thank you so much for telling us about this today and we will learn more next time.

Jessica Toft ([47:06](#)):

Sounds good, Ruti. Thank you for the interview. Appreciate it. Take care, everybody out there.

Ruti Soffer-Elnkave ([47:12](#)):

Yes. Be safe.

Jessica Toft ([47:16](#)):

Be democratic.

Ruti Soffer-Elnkave ([47:17](#)):

Yep. Bye bye.

New Speaker ([47:20](#)):

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