

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

Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us in our second podcast, in our series of three related to neoliberalism's impact on social welfare practice in the United States . Last podcast, the first one, we looked more carefully or maybe more broadly at what neoliberalism is to try to understand the complicated idea that has a ton of power in our social serving systems. And today we are going to focus more on what that might actually look like in practice, focusing on child welfare, practice, child protection, and all of the different sort of services that help children at risk for out of home placement. And we will start off by just reminding ourselves a little bit about what neoliberalism is because repetition is important with this concept and then moving into what it looks like in child welfare, how it's impacting child welfare services, and then turning the corner a little bit to think about what can we do about it as child welfare workers. What are some things, ideas that that will help us think about how can we can play a role maybe addressing it. And without further ado let's get started.

Jessica Toft ([01:28](#)):

My name is Jessica Toft

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([01:31](#)):

And I'm Ruti Soffer-Elnekave

Jessica Toft ([01:34](#)):

And we are going to just jump into it . But first I want to say that Rudy is, has been the research assistant on this project this whole year, and there's a variety of aspects of it. Again, this, the information from this project comes from our, our project on neoliberal impacts on social work practice in the United States. And I chair that project and Ruti's been a really important part of that project and she is now a PhD candidate. Congratulations, Ruti.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([02:06](#)):

Thank you.

Jessica Toft ([02:07](#)):

And, going to be moving back to Israel here fairly soon. And so, and I know you've had a lot of practice experience there in Israel.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([02:16](#)):

Yeah.

Jessica Toft ([02:17](#)):

In fact, you, you did work with families and children there.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([02:21](#)):

Yeah. I worked in foster care agency for over 10 years with different communities.

Jessica Toft ([02:26](#)):

And you were a supervisor and a direct practice worker. Is that right?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([02:29](#)):

Yes, that's right. And a manager at times.

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

And a manager at times. So, so you're going to have great perspective on this. You can play many roles as we, as we move through this topic. So thank you for being a part of this project and I'm excited to talk about it some more.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([02:47](#)):

So I think we wanted, so in our first podcast, we talked a lot about what neoliberalism is and effects on social policy and social work, but it would be great. Jessica, if you can remind us a little bit about what, how does neo-liberalism relate to social work and child welfare work?

Jessica Toft ([03:05](#)):

Sure. Well, if you listened to the first podcast, you know, neoliberalism, isn't an easy concept to totally grasp, but I think that for our purposes, we can think about neoliberalism as a governing principle, it's a way of approaching how to order and organize government. And that's one aspect of it. So, in neoliberalism the governing principle is that free markets are the most important aspect of social life. And we should endorse free markets and their wellbeing, by reducing business regulations and withdrawing welfare state protections. And so it's partly economic policy. That's endorsing free markets and reducing business regulations, but also requires change in our political and social and cultural, word, worlds and practices to, in order to support these markets. So this is where social work comes in and plays an important role.

Jessica Toft ([04:11](#)):

For example, if we think about social policies that would promote neo-liberalism would be those kinds of policies, that limit worker protections that make people, um, compel people to have to work in the market. So, and often without support. So, you know, we've had a lot, we've seen over the last, you know, four decades, a real decline in unions, for example, and right to work policies might be part of that. We've seen limits to healthcare accessibility. Um, even though we had the affordable care act, which was, move in the opposite direction, it's still within the model of markets. Um, rather than saying a social healthcare system, we see the limits of food supports where work requirements are attached to receiving SNAP benefits and States actually have to waive that requirement in order to offer food stamps without having people engage in work. Family assistance, TANF, being a prime example of neoliberalism where in order to receive benefits, parents must engage in paid work. So you know, markets need these low wage and flexible workers in order to compete and especially in a global market. So they would argue, you know, proponents of neoliberalism would argue, we need to have access to workers and we need to have them be able to engage in paid work in a flexible way. So this really promotes markets, perhaps over the wellbeing of families and children and just and workers, and their interests, perhaps.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([05:45](#)):

So these are really large scope, overarching policies that you were talking about, but in addition to the large welfare state policies, how else is neoliberalism seen in social policy that we can feel?

Jessica Toft ([06:02](#)):

Yeah, this is, so this is part of the peeling back, the onion of neoliberalism. And I think there are a couple of books that can be really helpful to get our thinking in the right headspace. So historically Cloward and Piven, and wrote a really influential work in 1971. And it was called *Regulating the Poor, the Functions of Public Welfare*. And then later on a lot of our social work students listening will have read Mimi Abramovitz's *Regulating the Lives of Women* in 1988. So these are both examples of how the government plays a role in regulating low-income populations in order to have them be available for the market. And then more recently, and those ones are really before neoliberalism is getting a strong look or has barely been considered, especially in 1971 would be really early into neoliberalism.

Jessica Toft ([06:55](#)):

But more recently Loic Wacquant wrote a book called *Punishing the Poor, Neoliberal Government and Social Insecurity*. And this is a look at the regulating work of our carceral systems, our policing, our prisons, and boy, this is certainly relevant today when here in Minneapolis we are reeling with the death of George Floyd and talking about things of even defunding the police. So, that is a really interesting book to think about today and think, and then we can think about even the more recent book in 2011 of Joe Soss, who's here at the University of Minnesota, along with his colleagues Fording and Schram. They wrote a text called *Disciplining the Poor, Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*. And they write about public assistance and even substance abuse programs and demonstrate how neoliberalism is used as a way of limiting and regulating the poor into systems, paternalistic sort of welfare systems.

Jessica Toft ([08:00](#)):

So this is a good backdrop for us to think about child welfare systems. It's also a public system and it's also run by the state and other counties, as you know, I'm using the state is a big in a big term way here. Um, but I think it's important for us to think about how are we as social workers and child welfare workers, perhaps a part of systems that work in ways that might play a role that aren't always beneficial to the clients, and maybe they're working towards the roles of markets or other interests that are maybe not the families or clients or citizens directly.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([08:39](#)):

Yeah, that sounds very interesting and important. Can you be a little bit more specific about how this works, how social service and systems are playing a role in this?

Jessica Toft ([08:49](#)):

Yeah. You know, I think it's important for us to think about, first of all, the principle of the political reasoning of neoliberalism that Wendy Brown this political philosopher. Who's written so much about, this has talked about, she says that neoliberalism requires that all social life, including social institutions, that their work should mirror the model of the market. And so within that are ideas that individuals should be thought of as solely as economic actors, and by the way, we're all just self interested and we're rational decision-makers. You know, all the you can figure out based on information, our best choices as rational beings. This is what, neoliberalism would say. So competition is an important principle in neoliberalism that we should constantly be in competition with other people. And, in social institutions that social institutions should compete because competition leads to efficiency is the idea. Also that, because we're individually responsible, we have to unpack that a little bit.

Jessica Toft ([09:49](#)):

What does that mean? Well, that means that we need to gather all of the relevant information as individuals, and we must accurately predict all the possible outcomes of our actions. And, through that, we should be able to predict those outcomes. And if those, if we choose unwisely, we should therefore bear the full risk is one of the ideas. So that it responsabilizes individuals for all of the possible variables in one's life and makes them responsible for it. Interactions are transactional exchanges. So I'm going to give you this, if you give me that sort of the quid pro quo. Again, efficiency, as an idea of being a really important idea for social institutions, as well as how we live our lives in terms of time and getting as much as done as we possibly can. because of this, you know, we have to be flexible. We have to accept risk as individuals where there's consequences. And it, you know, this really leads to a state of insecurity rather than one of security, because all of these things come down to our individual choices.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([10:56](#)):

So, that's so important. And how does, how does this bear on social work practice specifically like the philosophy in what we're doing?

Jessica Toft ([11:13](#)):

Yeah. So we can take this philosophy and think about those social institutions, that social workers work in. That these, this model of economic markets are overlaid, not just on a personalized, but they're also taken and they're overlaid on social institutions too. So the competition principle, we can see that among agencies vying for a contract, you know, I can do this for this much money. You know, I can do it lower. I can, I can give you more. We can even see it within agencies, among workers. You know, who's going to have the best numbers. Who's going to be the most efficient. Who's going to have the be most productive. The individual responsibility principle, we can see that clients are being, I mean workers are being responsabilized, if you could see my air quotes, as I'm talking here, they're being responsabilized because they are the outcomes of their clients are really being put onto them.

Jessica Toft ([12:06](#)):

You know, that the, how well they get them through their system and then out the door becomes all of their part of their responsibility without regard to maybe some of the larger environmental issues or circumstances in the individual. And we'd like, I see that with clients, they become totally responsible for their life outcomes, regardless of the opressions or the poverty or et cetera that might be working in their lives. Efficiency in work, is really important, you know, do things quickly and to do them timely way, but this, you know, competes with ideas of equity and about what's the best way to work with the family for the best outcomes for them, and maybe driven by their ideas of what are good outcomes. We see the transaction piece can be seen in contracts. You know, we're going to do this.

Jessica Toft ([12:57](#)):

If you get these kinds of outcome, we're going to pay you is sort of how the state sets up contracts with social services. And we see this, then workers working with parents in the same way. If you do X, Y, and Z, then you can have this, this benefit, or you can have maybe this visitation with your child or, you know, those sorts of those sorts of arrangements. Finally, I think about neoliberalism, it has an emphasis on risk and probabilities, which often gauge to large groups. And then we are forced to use them individually, the sort of risk reduction model on individual clients, which then focuses on reducing risk, which is a different positioning than possibilities based on maybe individual circumstances of a family, their life story. Maybe the relationship and the skill that the worker or the social worker or the child

welfare worker has with the, has with the client. So these are ways that we can see neoliberalism is impacting social work agencies, practice and the, and the relationship of workers with their clients.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([14:09](#)):

So you seem to move really quickly from social policy, which we talked about at the beginning to frontline social work practice, but isn't there something also in between how this works to get there.

Jessica Toft ([14:21](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So just as a way to think about it, neoliberalism is working on multiple levels of our, of our government system. And we know we as social workers, the direct practice, social workers, see it on one, one level, but we can think about it. Neoliberalism as applied, maybe even, just to think about it at a legislative level, maybe there's a policy that is passed. And then it moves to a state agency who has to take the spirit and maybe the directives of the policy, but they have to write rules, which make it more explicit. So there are places within that there where neoliberalism could definitely be evident. Think about HMO's and third party contracts being written between the state and HMO's for example, and then from there nonprofits and even private agencies, private for-profit agencies are buying for contracts that then are created at the rule making level at the state level.

Jessica Toft ([15:22](#)):

And they try to get contracts and work so their agency can survive. And then their program managers and then supervisors within these agencies. It's another way which neoliberalism can be implemented at that level. And finally down to direct practice social worker and certainly to our clients and service users. Um, so this is, you know, probably something that we could think if we really thought about it, we could pull these pieces out, and see them as distinct areas of decision making practice. But I want to also challenge us to think about our ideas and the ways in which we think of things as being maybe common sense. So a number of researchers have written about governance and logic and processes of logic, and that we can take up ideas and ways of thinking about the world and just apply them without reflection after a while.

Jessica Toft ([16:14](#)):

So I think neoliberalism is a good example of a logic that is being applied to all realms of our lives and certainly in our social institutions. So that might be another way to think about an aspect of this framework and even overarching, all of that would be the discourse. How do we think about ourselves as citizens and residents and people in the world? Are we thinking about ourselves as full humans, or are we thinking about ourselves as economic actors, human capital. And how does this, these, how did these ideas find themselves? Let's say in our direct practice with our, with our client, how much do we focus on, on the, on their paid work? How much should they focus on them, completing tasks, their efficiencies, et cetera. So those are some ways that we can think about how neoliberalism is sort of imbued in many steps of our social service systems.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([17:12](#)):

And so it's really everywhere.

Jessica Toft ([17:13](#)):

It's really everywhere. And in fact Wendy Brown would say we're all neoliberals. And, and we're, you know, it's the water in which we swim. Which I think is interesting because I think not many of us really understand it.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([17:26](#)):

Cause we don't see it. It's just there.

Jessica Toft ([17:27](#)):

And some would say that's part of why it's so powerful because we don't see it. So Ruti, I'd like to have ask you a few questions because I think this is really, you know, you've worked in this area and I, and I know that you're coming to the United States from Israel, but you've been here for quite a while now. And you've been working on this with us here. And I'm wondering if you could tell us, in our scope and review project, because you're the most knowledgeable of this literature. I thought it was interesting that we found that child welfare services was the most common service topic found out of all of our literature. And since you know that literature quite well, I was hoping that you could tell us more about what is known about neoliberalism and maybe in child welfare, I'll just leave it open for you.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([18:14](#)):

Yeah. Well, I think it, it makes sense that child welfare takes so much room because it's so much of what we do as social workers and part of our work. But still, even though we found 24 articles that addressed child welfare at some level, I'm afraid that not enough is known at the moment.

Jessica Toft ([18:34](#)):

And this is just in the United States, right? This isn't global.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([18:37](#)):

Just in the United States. We were looking only in the United States. So out of the 24 articles that we found, if we're looking back at the levels that you talked about just now only three articles really address the discourse level. I mean, what does what's behind what's happening in the child welfare system and most of the articles, 15 of them address the governance level. How is this being, how is this being implemented? So mostly how privatization and devolution of services have effected child welfare on the agency level. And what are the outcomes of that? So we're not researchers in child welfare are not looking about why this is happening. They're looking at their practice and that's very social working, right? We're, doing, we're, we're doing, we're implementing, we're working technique. We're going to the next step. We don't have time to be philosophers.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([19:34](#)):

We're very pragmatic, which is of course, part of the beauty of our job, but we also need to be committed to our values of social justice and reform and equity and all those things. So, only three articles address that level. And most of the articles were really looking at the practice of privatization what's working. What's not working. How might we do this better? How are agencies, nonprofit agencies and private agencies are working together with government agencies and how these partnerships might working. And it's also interesting to see that out of these 24 articles, seven articles addressed frontline workers experiences. So there's an emphasis on how, workers are experiencing burnout and retention. There's looking into how training is different in this era of privatization. So of

course this was privatization was also before this is not new to the U. S. But it's was really pushed forward in the last few decades.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([20:39](#)):

And it's also very interesting to see that nine articles addresses clients and how clients outcomes were changing. But they weren't looking into clients' voices. We hardly hear those. We don't know how children are experiencing these changes, how families are experiencing these changes in their real lives. So there's a lot of interest in the outcome benchmarks, which is very neoliberal, of course, like you said, so we're looking at how many, what are the numbers? What are the numbers of adoption? What are the numbers of reunification, but we're not hearing the voices, what is happening to the people in these numbers.

Jessica Toft ([21:18](#)):

Really interesting that we, you know, we know that there's so much turnover in child protection and child welfare, especially, so I mean, this is this, I'm not surprised to see that about burnout and retention, hear about that. But, I'm also interested in that clients are actually being looked at, but it's really only the numbers rather than what's their experience of this.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([21:41](#)):

For the most part.

Jessica Toft ([21:42](#)):

Okay. Well, so how about the agencies themselves? How would you say that neoliberalism is impacting child welfare agencies and organizations?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([21:55](#)):

Yeah, so, so that's, that is really the heart of it of the studies that we found that we're talking about the effects on child welfare, because they're talking about practices of privatization, which is a common way of neoliberal thought. So we're, we're already thinking privatization is a good thing. So let's see, how are we doing? How are we doing it? Can we do it any better? How, what are the changes that need to be implemented? And agencies are really being contracted by governments and States by defining market outcomes. So they're saying, okay, you're going to get monetary. You're going to get, we're gonna, we're gonna, that you, we're going to evaluate your performance by these benchmarks and you're going to be contracted by reaching these benchmarks. So we're looking at reunification, we're looking at adoption, we're looking at how fast agencies are able to make placements, any kinds of placements.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([23:06](#)):

And we're not looking into the processes and the wellbeing. So if we go back in 1997, there was the Federal Adoption and say, Families Act that was really meant to increase family reunification and adoption by family members. But also, it pushed this turn into looking only at outcomes rather than processes. So if I'm a, if I'm a child welfare agency, a nonprofit that's working in foster care, I'm going to look at how am I going to place a child the fastest in a foster family. And I'm in competition with you that you have own non-profit agency for foster families. And we might be competing for funding over the same children, right? So you're going to want to find a family faster than me, so we might decide to, okay, I have a family right here. I'm going to take it. Even though it might not be the best placement for

this child. I need to have a placement this month or else I won't reach my benchmark. So that's what I'm going to do. And it might be an expense of the wellbeing of the child. And it might be also a placement that will last two weeks, but that's not what is being counted. What's being counted is how many placements were actually made.

Jessica Toft ([24:22](#)):

It's such an interesting combination of both outcomes and time, you know, efficiency is, it's speed is part of this.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([24:30](#)):

Speed is very, very important. We're looking into numbers. So in a way it's important to save this, too, if I'm, if the goal of us as a society is to prevent abuse and to protect children, that's not what we're doing. We're looking at me as a foster care agency. I'm looking to put, to have placements. So I'm not going to be doing prevention. I'm not going to be doing other things for the community and for the welfare of children. I just want to find placements for these children. So for me, it might even be beneficial that more children will be removed from their homes rather than keeping them, keeping them at home.

Jessica Toft ([25:10](#)):

What you're highlighting here is probably this, this conflict of interest that we, you know, we have our primary interest is social workers of helping families and social workers and child welfare, helping families. And that's why we come to this work in the first place. And yet then there's this speed interest and pressure that we feel. And so maybe, maybe it pushes us sometimes to make decisions we wouldn't otherwise make.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([25:34](#)):

Yeah.

Jessica Toft ([25:34](#)):

Yeah. Interesting. So well,

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([25:39](#)):

And I might lose my job, right. If I'm a worker and I didn't have enough placements, I'm going to lose my job because I didn't reach my benchmark.

Jessica Toft ([25:46](#)):

Yes, it does put a lot of pressure. There's a, there must be a constant sort of calculus here in one's mind about how do I, how do I, how do I work with this family that meets both their needs and the needs of my agency and it's that difficult. Well, so can you tell us about some of the ways that agencies do address trying to achieve these outcomes? Like what does it look like?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([26:12](#)):

Oh, so, so there's so many ways that this is happening. So right. The U. S. is a huge place. And to begin with practices of child welfare are different, but in this environment they're even more different than what they were. So this has some advantages. So some agencies were very successful in implementing professional and beneficial ways of working with children and families. For instance, Cohen and Cooper



in 1999, evaluated a program in California that developed additional resources for kinship foster care families. And they did amazing work with the community. They really engage the community and brought more services to families that were providing foster kinship, foster care. And we know from the literature and from reality that these are families with many more needs a lot of times. So this agency, for instance, addressed community needs and bigger structures and was able to raise funds to do that.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([27:11](#)):

But other studies have showed that there wasn't any advantage actually to privatization over government based agencies. And this is very interesting because we're still continuing to privatize things, even though research hasn't found that it's actually beneficial in child welfare specifically. And also I wanted to highlight that some scholars and researchers have been encouraging marketization of agencies and of services. So for instance, Blackstone, Buck, and Hakim in 2004, they took marketizations of services sort of to the next level. And in my opinion, too far, they were recommending to use an auction model to support adoption. So they're suggesting opening the market for adoption, for adopting children to perspective parents nationwide that will bid for a child that's alarming.

Jessica Toft ([28:12](#)):

Yes, that is. And so it was sort of that the highest bidder who was qualified enough would be the one that the, that the state would, that was, this was the model state, you choose.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([28:24](#)):

Yeah. So the, their assumption is that there are a lot of children waiting for adoption and there are not enough families and, and services aren't making enough placements for adoption. And in order to do better, we can use a market-based model of auctioning. So families that have been qualified to adopt will just bid for children. And I don't know for me, if there's like the image of, old orphanages and the family comes and looks at the children and says, I want this one because he has blue eyes. But, there's more here to it. There's money and people that will have more money and we'll have other things will be able to bid higher for a child.

Jessica Toft ([29:11](#)):

And the, and then the States who, who would be receiving that money, that would be, there'd be again, one of the potential conflict of interest, but you'd be pushed to want to get the highest bidder, because that would be more money for your funds, for your services.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([29:24](#)):

Exactly, exactly. So they were suggesting also to keep the money for the children and it's not the state isn't going to benefit the children of the state will benefit from it, but still we're turning children into commodities.

Jessica Toft ([29:38](#)):

Well, you know, what this raises to me is that the idea of marketizing social welfare, the first example in California, it sounds like that actually was fairly successful, but it was for a really specific area. It was to develop more services for kinship foster care. It was, it was sort of like an ancillary, satellite sort of market where you could kind of, you know, a small creativity could be used. And then when you apply

that to how children should be adopted or et cetera, all of a sudden this, this profit motive tends to be really clear and probably harmful.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([30:20](#)):

I would think, and I, and I think we need to reflect back on our values all the time. What are we doing here? Who are we providing for, what is the purpose of this?

Jessica Toft ([30:33](#)):

Well I think about the workers too, asking workers to be in the middle of these interactions with families and parents and children and in their institutions, it must, it must be a wearing thing to have sort of, to always have a market perspective on, to always sort of be, feel like you're have to be efficient and productive. Can you talk more about how neoliberalism in this way has affected child welfare workers?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([30:59](#)):

Yeah, so we found seven studies that addressed the issue of child welfare workers at some level. And most of them really found that training was an issue. There was a lot of turnover, there's more burnout, there's effects on work, family balance there's effect about commitment of workers to their agency and to their work. So there's, I mean, turnover, isn't new to child welfare, but we see it higher in nonprofit and for-profit agencies. So for instance, a study by Levi Portner and Lieberman from 2002, they found that privatized child welfare staff that worked under performance-based contracts. So that's really what we're talking about. The benchmarks put workers under increased pressure to meet deadlines for achieving permanency, for finalizing adoption, for placing children with relatives. And they found that these workers had higher rates of work, family conflict specifically, but also of they had lower rates of job satisfaction. And these two variables also predicted workers intention to quit their jobs. So this really talks about burnout and turnover, which we don't want in child welfare. And we know from the literature that workers turnover is harmful for children and for their placements in child welfare.

Jessica Toft ([32:20](#)):

Yeah. And, this, it just reminds me that these performance contracts they sound to the listening ear outside it sound like a great idea, right? Let's keep people performing quickly and efficient and they'll get these outcomes, done. But these outcomes realized, but then we have these families that how how hard it must be for them and then how the workers are. And they're in the position of having to work with a really pressurized work environment.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([32:54](#)):

Yeah. And we have to remember that there's not a ton of funds here, right? So caseloads are growing. They're not getting any smaller and workers are working under circumstances that pressure is, is all the time getting higher and higher. So efficiency isn't, doesn't mean that okay, you're done and you can go home. You're just going to get more.

Jessica Toft ([33:21](#)):

What's the literature showing us, how is it affecting child welfare workers under neoliberalism?

Ruti Soffer-Elkekave ([33:27](#)):

Yeah, so we found seven studies that address this issue and at some level or another, and most of them looked into workers turnover, workers, burnout, work, family balance training issues, and also work as commitment to their agency into their work. And Levi Portner and Lieberman conducted a study in 2012, for instance. And they found that privatized child welfare staff that worked under performance-based contracts that put workers under increased pressure to meet the deadlines for achieving permanency for finalizing adoptions, for placing children, with relatives, and this caused workers to have higher rates of work-family conflict, and also higher rates of, not higher rates, lower rates of job satisfaction. And these variables also predicted workers intention to quit their jobs. So being under this constant pressure was affecting workers well-being including retention.

Jessica Toft ([34:30](#)):

Wow. That's, that's fascinating. And it seems like we should do even more work about what interviewing child welfare workers like what's their experience, the quality of their work.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([34:41](#)):

Definitely. We don't have their voices enough. There's more to be heard. And, La Rose in 2016 also showed how neoliberalism affected workers by holding them responsible for client outcomes. We talked about accountability and individualized responsibilities. So this is really talking about that. And she also mentioned how workers had to be were held liable for their client outcomes. And this was very distressful for these workers. And maybe we'll mention more about that later, but workers come to do a good job with families and having such large case loads and being under so much pressure, just causes them at the end to leave.

Jessica Toft ([35:27](#)):

Right. Well, you think coming to your work with so many skills and understanding and value base, and maybe not being able to use them the way that you, or that you hoped for, makes that difficult proposition.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([35:44](#)):

Very much. And you hear people in that are studying to be social workers. They say, Oh, I'm not going to go to child welfare child protection because I hear it's terrible. You can't do your job.

Jessica Toft ([35:55](#)):

Well, you know, and neoliberalism affects all areas of social work, right. It's not just child protection. But what else should we understand about child welfare work specifically under neoliberalism?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([36:10](#)):

I think we have a lot more to learn. And one of the things I would say we need to put an emphasis on is really the effects of marketization of children on society as a whole, right? So we're looking at children as commodities and this has an effect on all of us and how we're helping children, how we're acting as families. So Finn, Nybell and Shook in 2010, for instance, that looked into these processes of marketization and globalization, they argued that a critical grasp of economic mobilization and neoliberalism is really key to understanding what's happening and the context of practicing with children and youth, because childhood and youth are being constructed in a different way in terms of economic uncertainty, right. Because everything is about the money rather than the relationship.

Jessica Toft ([37:06](#)):

Yeah. I think about how, if even the middle class is living in a field of insecurity, we focus more on the human capital of our children. How can we invest in them? How can we buy the best camp or, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And you can imagine for poor children this is a really difficult thing because the low resource families have less access to invest into human capital, if we're using that model, but that certainly has an impact on family life.

Ruti Soffer-Elnkave ([37:37](#)):

And specifically within child welfare. So services to our most vulnerable populations are given to the highest bidder. And in this case, it's even the lowest bidder because governments are going to contract with agencies that are going to say, we're going to do the same job for less money, but less money means really compromising on the quality of services.

Jessica Toft ([38:03](#)):

Right. And it seems like this, it puts social workers in a really difficult position. Partly, you know we are of the system in a way, when you talk about commodifying children, I think about commodifying social problems, you know, the ways that we set up social problems so that we work on them, maybe one person at a time and with the best intentions, but yet if we can also see that, that we have a position and a profession and so, I mean, the cynic might say, what's good for business is more business. And so maybe we need to think about take back. This is so as the philosopher, the rulings of the philosopher of this podcast, but this moment, maybe I will talk about philosophy a little bit more and think about street-level bureaucracy as a way of thinking about democracy, perhaps.

Jessica Toft ([39:02](#)):

And Ruti, you've heard me talk about street-level bureaucracy in the past. I think it does relate here. First of all, I think we think about our social institutions as humanly constructed, you know, that they are, they're not out of nature. They're not inevitable. They are created and thought through and their practice and performed by human beings. So that means we can change our institutions too. And institutions are, you know, we could think of them as being both rules, you know, policy rules, institutional rules, but they also are performed by individuals who have discretion and judgment. So enter social workers here, you know, as having discretion and, and judgment. So structural conditions can sometimes put parameters around our discretion, you know, how, what our organizations look like. So the structure of the agency, maybe how hierarchical it is, how many resources we have at our fingertips.

Jessica Toft ([39:59](#)):

What are the workload pressures we feel based on our supervision expectations from our, you know from our supervisors. What other rules and constraints we have from our organizations and even the organizational climate. If it's one of, maybe egalitarianism or kind of connection with families, et cetera, would be very different than, uh, that's one of the efficiencies that we're painting, um, with the, with the research is showing. Um, but then for social workers to be the actors within these institutions, that they have discretion and judgment you know, discretion really becomes a political act because we as social workers and child welfare workers have influence over the access of our families, the citizens, the residents of our communities to social services and welfare benefits that are, that represent rights of social rights of citizens. And we also have discretion in terms of how we interact with them and their experience of trying to access those services.

Jessica Toft ([41:06](#)):

And in fact, there was some research that shows that the type of interaction and the degree of the responsiveness of the street-level bureaucrat also known as the social worker or child welfare worker signals something to their clients about who they are in the state as a political actor. So Joe Soss who's here at the University of Minnesota, did a study where women and public welfare offices, accessing AFDC kind of the last year AFDC, was even around, found that how the worker interacted with, with them impacted their sense of their political efficacy, whether or not they could actually make a change in the politics, even outside of the welfare office, who they were as a democratic actor in society. So what's important for us to understand is that child, welfare workers, social workers, we mediate this relationship. We're sending signals to our clients about their relationship with their state, with their democracy and how we interact with them and what we choose to offer, provide and do for them, tells them something about themselves. So this is an important role for us.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([42:22](#)):

Definitely.

Jessica Toft ([42:22](#)):

So I'm wondering, thinking about child welfare, you know, what are your thoughts about how child welfare can maybe emphasize instead of a neoliberal practice, maybe more this idea of a democratic practice, valuing human practice?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([42:39](#)):

Yeah, I think there's a lot of ways child welfare workers can do that. And it starts with what you said is this the human interaction and how that's happening between workers and the families that there are providing services to, but also how we look at ourselves and at our workplace. So we can make our voices heard. We can do different things to do that. And I want to highlight an interesting initiative that one of the articles discussed. So La Rosa from 2016 described how child welfare workers in Washington State were constantly experiencing increasing their workloads. And they decided to do something about it. The workers there decided to do something about it, and they produced a YouTube video about their work reality about their case loads about their increased liability and how that affected them and their clients. And this YouTube video hit like I think over 5 million views.

Jessica Toft ([43:38](#)):

Wow! People were interested in it.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([43:41](#)):

People were interested and people responded to it, including policymakers. So they were able to make that change. And one of the things that helped them was that they were unionized and they were, they had a back, they felt they can, they can say what their, what was going on without getting hurt, without being fired. And a lot of people don't feel that in the private sector and the non-profits and for profit agencies. And there's an interesting article by Mosley and Ross from 2011, that they said that that's a misconception. So workers in nonprofits and in for-profits can still be advocates. It's not against the law, it's not against their contract. So, and if it is in their contract, maybe they should do something about it because it's social workers we have, part of our job is to be advocates is to look at how we're creating a more just society.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([44:33](#)):

It's not only on the individual level. And we have a commitment to our communities and to our clients and to society. So one way might be to organize. Another way is to organize amongst us as social workers, but there's also advocacy that we could do together with our clients, which brings us together. So we can write letters to the legislature by social workers and clients, or only by social workers, but everything is available, but we can also go to our boards and to our associations and ask them to be accountable for our work, ask them to help us make a change in our work environments, because that's what they're there for. And we're not alone in this. We have to remember that we can do more together.

Jessica Toft ([45:18](#)):

I love that you, you brought that there is some misperception about what people can do in terms of their advocacy. And there is a, there's an article I'm missing the name right now, but we'll be sure that we put it on as on part of the reading list that goes over really clearly. It's much more expansive than most social workers think that about the kinds of political work that we can do on behalf of our clients and social issues, et cetera. And I love that you bring up NASW and the Board of Social Work, both as a professional association and our licensing boards, that these, uh, they should also be looking out for the wellbeing of the profession, but also clients. And that's what, that's what the board of social work is for us to protect the public. Great.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([46:01](#)):

And I do want to give an example from my work in Israel, cause we had a big, um, social workers strike a few years back and you know, a lot of people say social workers shouldn't do that and they're just hurting their clients. And that's, that might be true at some level, but then there was so much backing from clients for social workers to achieve their rights in their workplace, because that gives, that gives voice also to the people that we work with, because if we're going to be working in better conditions, the services we're going to be giving are going to be better. So it doesn't, we don't have to be unionized for that, but we can do a lot of things together with our clients, for both, for everybody.

Jessica Toft ([46:47](#)):

It reminds me of the nurses strikes and the teacher strikes recently. Really trying to benefit, benefit their students and their patients by benefiting those who work with them or by improving their work lives. Yeah.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([47:02](#)):

Exactly. And I think there was a lot of solidarity here of parents and families with teachers and with nurses.

Jessica Toft ([47:09](#)):

Yeah. That makes a lot of sense.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([47:11](#)):

I was wondering if there's anything else you wanted to add about this, about what social workers can do.

Jessica Toft ([47:18](#)):

Yeah. You know, I can't help but think about this present moment that we're in right now here in Minneapolis, in Minnesota and how our experience with George Floyd, has sparked a global protest. I mean, if, if there's, uh, if neoliberal is to reduce the idea of human down to an individual market actor, but only with self-interests, these protests are an expression of the opposite. This is an example of people coming together of solidarity and looking at other systems that are created that may impact groups differentially. And I think that we should think about that. We should look at our systems and think reflectively, how do our systems of helping people, especially oppressed or vulnerable or disenfranchised or poor people. How are we affecting them? And you know, neoliberalism calls for us not to think about techniques as much as to think about ideas.

Jessica Toft ([48:25](#)):

And that's been the power of neoliberalism is that ideas have permeated all these different kinds of social institutions that we are a part of from our workplaces to our educational systems, to our family lives, to our individual thoughts. And we need to think on that scale, I think in a counter of some kind, and we're going to do it right here in this podcast, it's going to start here, here's the scene. But you know, this is being thought out in many other places, but I do think that we need to think beyond techniques when we're thinking about what is good child welfare practice to ideas and philosophies, and our social institutions that they're not just rules that we have to follow, but they are animated and enacted by individuals, you and me who are social workers, child, welfare workers, and that we have some power over these and we have a ways to push back.

Jessica Toft ([49:18](#)):

So since these systems are created by humans, we can change them also. And social workers have had a long history of being change agents. And I think we should take up this mantle again and think about how are we maybe promoting some of these neoliberal agendas. So, you know, we can think of democracy. I said this in the last podcast. I think it's a good thought for us to think about what is our challenging idea. Um, and if individually, if neoliberalism is interested in individual responsibility and accountability, well, democracy is, we can say is interested in social responsibility and shared risk. Um, if neo-liberalism focuses, you know, primarily on efficiency of systems, we can think about democracy as a possible avenue for promoting equity of systems and how we treat people, not just equally, because sometimes we don't want to treat them equally, but with an end towards equity that we're thinking about how can we have, how we are all of equal moral worth and how can we treat people so that their lived experiences are more similar to one another rather than so unequal from one another.

Jessica Toft ([50:33](#)):

Neoliberalism if it's about reducing individual risk, as a way of thinking about practice, well, democracy is thinking about preventing social problems, promoting public wellbeing, this, again, the ideas of a national health insurance system of a family allowance. If we had those things in place, living wage, imagine how many fewer cases in child protection or how many, fewer people would need child welfare services. If neoliberalism believes that markets are the only ways to organize public goods, democracies can think about maybe constructing, uh, ways of public deliberation and ideas of justice. Rules that are created by the people for the people, rather than maybe by markets or managed to look like markets, if neoliberalism, it sees individuals as solely economic actors, democracy can see us as social and political ones that it's not just about our economic lives, that we don't want to live in economic life

Jessica Toft ([51:38](#)):

in our family, with our children. We want to live a life social life of caregiving. We want to live a life of imparting values of human, that the value of humans, humankind, these, these are ideas of democracy. So democracy is a set of ideas, has, puts people back in the driver's seat. People who are affected by the policies we are the government, and we should have an impact and how our government benefits and rights are dispersed to us. And as public goods, they shouldn't be limited. We should have access to them. So I think that's our big idea here that we can think about in social work. How can we be agents of democracy rather than agents of neoliberalism? And I think the child welfare example is a, is a great example of maybe an area that we could, we should really start thinking about this more carefully. What do you think Ruti?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([52:39](#)):

I think that was very inspiring. But definitely there's, you know, social workers are doing their best, but we need to sync together how we're doing better. Not because we're not trying it's because there's things to be done differently.

Jessica Toft ([52:58](#)):

Absolutely. And this idea that we don't want to responsiblize child welfare workers for all these issues, just that they're a piece of the puzzle that we all have a vested interest in changing this. So universities, our community members, our elected officials, et cetera. Absolutely. We're all part of a bigger movement, I think here.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([53:21](#)):

Exactly.

Jessica Toft ([53:21](#)):

Well, Rudy, I want to thank you so much for your work on this project and for helping us understand child welfare specifically in neoliberalism and anything else you'd like to say before you..?

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([53:34](#)):

No, not right now. I just want to say thank you. And I hope we continue these conversations.

Jessica Toft ([53:39](#)):

I do too. And in fact, thanks for that lead in because we have one more podcast on this Impacts of Neoliberalism on Social Work Practice. And I'm very excited that our next podcast will be with the renowned Mimi Abramovitz, social welfare history and policy scholar, and Jennifer Zelnik, her collaborator on many projects with neo-liberalism, we're going to hear about their findings of a managerialism, especially in New York city. Managerialism among social service, human service providers. And we get some more numbers and impacts of neoliberalism with that conversation. So I hope folks tune into that.

Ruti Soffer-Elnekave ([54:23](#)):

Yeah. Looking forward to hear that

Speaker 2 ([54:27](#)):



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