Jessica Toft (00:00:04):

Welcome everyone. This is Jessica Toft and I want to thank you for joining us for our third podcast in our series of three related to neoliberalism's impact on social welfare and social good practice in the United States with an emphasis on child welfare work today, we will be learning about the findings of a research project that asks social service workers about their practice life under the pressures of neoliberalism. We are privileged to talk with Dr. Mimi Abramovitz and Dr. Jennifer Zelnik who conducted this large scale study in New York city.

Jessica Toft (00:00:40):

Morning, everyone. I'm really pleased to have two amazing guests with us today. Mimi Abramovitz, a lot of the social workers in the audience will know her. She is the Bertha Capen Reynolds Professor of Social Policy at the Silberman School of Social Work, Hunter College and the CUNY graduate center. She's widely published in the area of women poverty and the welfare state. And currently she's researching the impact of the austerity on the human service workforce. In addition to her numerous articles, she is the author of Regulating the Lives of Women, Social Welfare Policy: From Colonial Times to the Present. She's currently writing a book, Gendered Obligations: The History of Activism Among Black and White Low-Income Women Since 1900. And she began her career as a welfare worker in the state of Connecticut. And most recently she received the 2018 Significant Lifetime Achievement and Social Work Education Award from the Council on Social Work Education.

Jessica Toft (00:01:43):

And we're really privileged to have you with us here today. Thank you for being with us. And Jennifer Zelnik, professor and Social Welfare Policy Chair at the Touro College Graduate School of Social Work. She holds a master's degree in Social Work and a doctorate in Public Health and conducts research in the United States and South Africa. And she is a public health social worker, committed to bringing social work skills into public health research and services, investigating topics of importance to the health and social service workplace. And that the quality of health and social services and successful outcomes depend on sustainable work environments, which are determined by social policy. And Dr. Zelnik's work investigates the impact of factors of austerity, managerialism and privatization on the social service workplace and social work profession. And I know you have an organizing and occupational health and safety policy background.

Jessica Toft (00:02:42):

And so your research is geared on a policy that will help us have more healthier work environments for our direct practice workers. I want to thank you both again for sharing your expertise with us today. And we'll just get started. So first of all, I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you're guests for our third and final podcast of the series on the effects of neoliberalism and social work and child welfare practice. And the first podcast we delved into what neoliberalism means. It's a complex topic. So we took some time to talk about that and how we can know it when we see it in the workplace and the second podcast, we covered the literature on how neoliberalism is evident in child welfare practice in particular and due to the scoping study project we had here at the School of Social Work.

Jessica Toft (00:03:41):

And so with this installment, we will be able to hear about what I believe is a unique in the field about a large scale study on the effects of neoliberal managerialism on social work and social service practice and Mimi and Jen, I, I learned of your work on managerialism from a colleague who had recently moved

from New York city, who knew about your work and the study that you wrote. And it was called and she said she sent it to me. It was called Business as Usual? A Wake-up Call for The Human Services and it, and so there was results for The Human Service Workforce Study. And as I read it, I thought, this is it. This is, this is what more people need to hear about people who are direct line workers. And, um, I think this is really important for child welfare practitioners to learn about. And so to start us off, thought I'd ease us into the topic of how you got interested in studying. I'm calling it neoliberal managerialism in the first place.

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:04:41](#)):

Well, thanks Jessica for all of that. And so the lovely intro, this is something that Mimi and I have been talking about for a long time, we've worked together teaching policy to social work students. And, you know, initially this really grew out of the stories we were hearing in the classroom from our students, as we discussed the history and development of social welfare policies in this country. We started to hear more and more concerning stories about you know, problems that people were encountering in their field placements or in their workplace. And this really attracted our attention to this topic. In terms of where I was coming from personally, you know, I had worked for years with nurses who were, you know, delivering services in an environment that was increasingly constrained by a business model. And in this environment, you know, we were seeing increases in stress and injury and burnout. And the stories that I was hearing from students made me realize it sounded like very similar dynamics and also that we didn't have the same advocacy around these topics in social work that you have in the medical field. So those were, those were some of my original reasons for wanting to study this topic this way.

Mimi Abramovitz ([00:05:56](#)):

Yeah. So just in addition, I, teach, as Jen said, we both teach Social Welfare Policy. I teach, when I teach it to students their first semester in the master's program. So they're really green, they don't even necessarily know what social policy is much less neoliberalism or managerialism. So I had to, I wanted to find a way to explain to them because they're just entering social work, how and why the social services do not always, are not always like what they read in the books or not always like what we, what they hope they would be. And that, but I also wanted them to know that these problems were not accidental. That what the, sort of the quality of work that Jen just mentioned,refered to, it was not accidental, and that it actually represented an intentional policy strategy called neoliberalism, which your audience knows all about now, good to your earlier podcasts.

Mimi Abramovitz ([00:06:52](#)):

And that neoliberalism was intentionally introduced in the mid 1970s and took in the United States and took center stage with the election of President Reagan. Now, most of my students were adults since Reagan. They knew nothing about earlier periods, like some of us on this podcast. So since, since I'm a critic of neoliberalism, I wanted them to know that it had not always been this way. I wanted them to have a little sense that why we have it, where did it come from? And there was a prior period called the New Deal that went from the thirties to, after to the seventies and when the Human Services they're far from perfect, but we're not so mean-spirited. So, they were less market driven, more humane, and I wanted them to know that they could be changed. So this is a strategy to say, where did this come from? And to let people know, I hope that what is done can be undone.

Jessica Toft ([00:07:53](#)):

And it's such a wonderful message. I think about this podcast happening during the time of COVID and after the protest of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, and history becomes so important, doesn't it? That there are, that these are, these are constructed by people, humans, and we can construct, and with other things that have worked maybe before or in different ways, we can use our power and imagination. So, because in the, the prior podcast we were talking about neoliberalism and we hadn't talked about managerialism specifically, I was hoping maybe you could give your definition for what is managerialism maybe how does it fit into your idea of what neo-liberalism is .

Mimi Abramovitz ([00:08:34](#)):

I'll start with that. So first of all, as you probably know, by now, neoliberalism, it defines the landscape of the human services, child welfare, mental health services, but with troubling implications for all areas. The goal of neoliberalism, as we define it is to redistribute income upwards from the have-nots from the poor, to the halves, the top 1% of rich and downsize or shrink this safety net or what we call the welfare state. So how do they do this? There are five tactics that we talk about and they should be familiar to most of you. One is tax cuts, the infamous tax cuts. And these have been going on since the mid seventies, all of these budget cuts, I mean, who doesn't suffer budget cuts, privatization privatization shifts responsibility from social welfare, responsibility for social welfare from the public to the private sector. Devolution, that word is probably less familiar, but it basically means shifting responsibility from, for social welfare, from the federal government to the States.

Mimi Abramovitz ([00:09:36](#)):

I don't know, I'm sure that's going on in child welfare, but welfare reform is the iconic example of that. And then reducing the power of social movements, attacking the social movements, who brought, helped construct the sort of pressure for the welfare state and that their best positions to fight back. So if you're going to tear down the welfare state, you don't want them getting in your way. So privatization, now the third strategy, I mentioned this privatization, it's a strategy that links neoliberalism to managerialism when most people think of privatization however they think of privatizing social security or privatizing Medicare, which, politicians have on and off tried to do, but have failed so far. But another form of privatization occurs within inside our human service organizations, both public and nonprofit. And so we call this managerialism its the operationalization of privatization within human service organizations.

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:10:36](#)):

Yeah. So that's, you know, the beautiful contextualization of the history of where privatization fits in and something that you know Mimi and I went back and did, when we started to think about managerialism was to really rethink privatization in terms of the whole history of social welfare policy. Um, because you know, here in the U. S. the private sector is a very important player in terms of how we structure our lives and think about our wellbeing. And so there has always been this tension between, you know, the role of the federal government, particularly since the New Deal and the role of the private sector in delivering social welfare. And, and so we began to look at privatization in terms of really three phases, and managerialsim is one of those phases, and it's really a phase we're still in right now, but, you know, originally even within our public services and the New Deal, we always had some degree of a role for the private sector.

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:11:36](#)):

You know, we had the, you know, the Food Stamp Program, which was an early example of bringing sort of agricultural markets into the provision of food for people that needed it. And so, you know, in thinking about it, we sort of identified, there's always been this role for and then even for the private sector. But managerialism, which is the second phase of privatization was really introduced at a time when the role of the public sector was coming into question, um, you know, in the late sixties and the early seventies. And there, you know, at that time there was, you know, real backlash against the war on poverty programs and the role of federal government and the size of private programs. And so within that backlash, there was, you know, sort of a twin thing going on. First of all, that we you know, that we should be thinking about issues like accountability and efficiency, we look at how we're spending public dollars, um, before we even start thinking about the wellbeing of people that use those funds.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:12:39):

So that's one aspect of managerialism. And then the second is really the fact that a lot of our, services within our mixed welfare state, in the U. S. they include public sector services and private nonprofit delivered services such as child welfare. And so, you know, in these areas, you have a lot of contracting. So this is another opportunity to sort of import the business model through the nature of the types of contracting that we have in the sector. And that's another aspect of managerialism, but I think in short, you know, the big picture is really thinking about bringing a business model into human services and the same questions that we would attach to the delivery of private sector production or private sector services. We would attach to the delivery of social services. And that is really the goal of managerialism. The third phase of privatization, just to mention, it, we're not really going to talk about it today is something we call financialization. Which is you know, the importing of investment opportunities within the human service sector. And we have seen, you know, very good examples of how private companies have actually extracted money out of the federal government sometimes, you know, in the service of solving social problems. And so that's something we've seen happen in a lot of different cycles, but we're going to leave that aside for today and really just focus on managerialism, you know, importing the business model into the human services.

Jessica Toft (00:14:13):

I would love to talk more about that at some point. I think that these are, this is such an important conversation for social service workers, child welfare workers, social workers, understand, cause we don't often talk about these kinds of terms or ideas, and just the idea of taking a business model of management and applying it to services for the well-being of humans, that there are some difficult, you know, circles to square that, you know, how do you treat humans, with an efficiency model. And so there's more there, but neoliberalism, that the governance strategies are really where we feel neoliberalism as citizens and residents. And so this is, this seems to be where managerialism lies is how do we govern through contracting, especially in social work. So let's get to your study then. You were interested in, what does this look like? How is it affecting the direct line workers and supervisors and et cetera, I'll let you tell us about the study. So who was involved and, in general, what were you interested in finding out when you began this study?

Jennifer Zelnik (00:15:29):

Right. So in order to start this study, we really began engaging with a lot of different actors and players within the greater New York metropolitan area who had a shared interest in some of these topics. And because we wanted to overcome sort of a limitation of some research in this field, which is that, you know, different types of services are studied separately, whether it's, you know, substance abuse

treatment, or child welfare services or services for the elderly, we really wanted to look at what the trends were across different sectors. So in order to do that, we needed to really collaborate on the front end with a wide range of partners who could help us conduct this research. And so we went around and we had a lot of discussions and a lot of meetings, and we ended up, collaborating with several community partners, including the chapter, the city chapter of NASW, a couple of sort of agency coalitions, including that settlement, the Coalition of Settlement House Agencies here in New York City, Coalition of Human Service Agencies, Public Human Services Council, Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:16:42):

And additionally, the union that represents the child welfare workers who are in the public sector, as well as our public assistance workforce. And so by involving all these partners on the ground, this was how we created our access to frontline workers in all these areas. And also this informed the development of our survey and our questions and our language and so forth.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:17:06):

You know, you just reminded me, I'm going to talk about what we were looking for, but we also in another partner, was it something called the New York Nonprofit Press, which doesn't exist anymore, but they actually posted a link to our survey on their newsletter electronic newsletter. So it helped us collect a very big we'll discuss it later, but a large number of people who participated in the study because of all these partners. And, and I was always very happy about the Nonprofit Press and sorry to see they disappeared from the scene.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:17:41):

Yes well ironically, the Nonprofit Press sort of got bought up by a larger media conglomerate and the character of it changed quite a bit. So it seemed to really reflect what was happening within the stuff we were studying at that time. So it was a real loss to the community .

Jessica Toft (00:17:58):

But it's so impressive. How many different kinds of social service providers you got who were involved and were interested. And it demonstrates also for New York City, for us in Minnesota, just what a rich and diverse group of social service providers you have. So it was, its large scale. And how, so maybe you could tell us a little bit more about how many you know, people were involved and a little bit more about the survey itself.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:18:25):

Well, actually I have one more thing we want to add before we go there.

Jessica Toft (00:18:29):

Okay. Please go ahead, sorry!

Mimi Abramovitz (00:18:32):

So I would, just to foreshadow that, what you asked, what were you interested in, what we were trying to find and so on. So let me just say a few words about that. So we wanted to know what , we wanted to know, what managerialism looked like in the agencies. We had been buried in the literature, reading all

about it. International and U.S.studies. But we hadn't seen much written about it in the United States. So that was like one of our goals. One of the features of managerialism, which we'll be talking about soon, how did it affect the quality of work? How did it affect the life of frontline workers on the job who were implementing this? What did they think of managerialism, what did the frontline workers think of, managerialism?

Mimi Abramovitz (00:19:17):

How do they manage it? How do they cope? So those are the kinds of things we looked at. And I just want to add, we were not happy about managerialism from the start. So people say, well, why aren't you biased? Didn't you, you know, aren't you going to find what you expected? Well, we are good researchers, we were well-trained and we know how to put your biases on the side. So we asked, we asked, we had a long list of features of managerialism that we had collected from the literature items that were manifestations of managerialism. And so we get, this was, our survey was based on this list. And we asked people to tell us if they viewed any of these things as basically problematic or not problematic. So we let them say it wasn't a problem. If they had said it wasn't a problem, our critique would have been rejected or disproved. That's not what happened, but that's just to say, we were able to put our biases aside and set the questionnaire up. So it would capture whatever people were really thinking a little more on this later.

Jessica Toft (00:20:19):

Well, and I want to say too, because here in Minnesota, it's certainly, um, in NASW I was a president for the chapter for a while, and I can't tell you how many social workers came up to me and talked about this feeling of pressure and speed up and stress. And so it's one of those things that you notice from the literature, but also just anecdotally you know, having been in the profession for a number of decades, you can just, you can kind of, you feel it and you hear it and you see it

Mimi Abramovitz (00:20:48):

We had that experience. So that's what Jen was referring to in the beginning. It was all, I mean, people were talking about it, but they didn't know what it was. And they just thought, this is how things are. And we wanted to say one, it didn't have to be this way and two we came from somewhere. So that's goes back to what we said before. Yeah.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:21:06):

And I think you know, just to you know, it really is about connecting the dots for a lot of them because social workers tend to think about the person in front of them and the individual in front of them or the family or the community, and not so much of these structural levels. But I think that's the, you know, I think the big lesson, you know, that's running throughout this conversation is that we do need to pay attention to history and what's happening to the structure of our sector. If we're going to be able to continue to do the work that we need to do.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:21:35):

Exactly.

Jessica Toft (00:21:35):

Right. Excellent. Well, so let's get more into a little bit about the specific questions that you asked in the survey. And so that the listeners get a sense of what exactly did you ask maybe, and maybe as they're listening, they might think to themselves, how would I answer that question?

Jennifer Zelnik ():

Right. Well, so just to, to give a little background of what the survey was and how we delivered it, it was a cross-sectional survey, meaning that it was like a point in time question about a variety of topics. Although you know, we did try to phrase the questions so that we could have people reflect on, you know, their, either their whole career or their recent experience. It was an online anonymous survey, meaning that people could access it via their smartphone or their computer, the workplace, it made it very easy to distribute. It, we also included open-ended questions. So mainly the questions were, you know, yes. You know, I had the question format, maybe it was referring to whether something was a major problem, a minor problem, not a problem, or it just didn't exist in their workplace.

Jennifer Zelnik ():

But we also had some opportunity for open-ended response and we got hundreds of pages of notes of open-ended responses as well. You know, we ended up with over 3000 responses, about 3027 responses. And then we looked at who among those were actually living in the New York Metro region and working in the sector currently. And we restricted it down to about 20, 2,700 or so at the end that we've used for analysis. And so Mimi's going to talk a little bit about the profile of who we heard from and the diversity of people.

Mimi Abramovitz ():

I mean, we also had a very, almost a 40% response rate, which is very high for surveys in general. Usually it's about 15% if you're lucky. So we were,we said after we started reading the comments and the results that we felt, we hit an area where people sort of got it, people really wanted to ventilate and talk about the kind of questions that, and what we, the whole situation that they now had a name for. Okay. So first we gathered demographic info cause we wanted to know who was going to be talking to us. So just briefly, that 80% were women, 45% persons of color, 60% frontline workers with the rest being higher on the hierarchy that 70% in nonprofits, 27% in the public sector and 67 belonged to a union and 50% were MSWs. So in many ways, this sample, even though it was kind of an accidental sample was represented our field.

Mimi Abramovitz ():

That was kind of, except for, we had many more people of color than surveys usually capture. And that's because of the help with the union and because of the public sector largely, and also we had a lot more union members, most surveys don't even collect union, identify union members, or even approach them. So we felt very proud of this 3000 people that we felt it was a good sample and the overrepresented groups were important to hear from. And we focused on key areas, service provision, things like supervision, access, advocacy, professional autonomy, the quality of service, a whole bunch of things, working conditions, staffing, training. Control over the job, and, impact on the workers like burnout, morale, stress, job satisfaction, and turnover. And so we didn't have a lot, we didn't want to say a lot about this, but I just pulled out the survey.

Mimi Abramovitz ():

Cause you asked her a couple of questions, so I'm going to say a couple things. So I'm just, well, I'm just looking at the survey. So we had these, these areas like serviceability, working conditions and then we had, you know, eight, five, four, three questions under each one. So under this one about program issues, we had the people we serve have too many requirements like eligibility; a problem, not a problem. And we had a few, we calibrated that a little more, but basically a problem, not a problem Or It doesn't, it's not an issue here or, the staff and the program staff and funders have different definitions of successful outcomes. And so they could say yes or no. So these are the things that we know were sort of the features of managerialism that present problems, but they could tell us yes or no; problematic or not problematic. So, I mean, there are a hundred questions.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:26:20):

I was going to say one that came to mind to me because we're speaking to people that work in the child welfare sector in particular is you know we had a question about the need to open and close cases quickly. And so we know in many States you know, there's some guidelines here in New York, we have this, that you, as a caseworker, you can only have a certain amount of open cases and you'll have to close a certain amount per month and that you have a manager overseeing that you're meeting those guidelines. And so this was the kind of question that we thought was really important to capture how much pressure that was putting on people.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:26:54):

And I'd just like to add one more that I think is widespread. We had the statement was, computers come between the staff and the people we serve. So because of, because our own experience in doctor's offices where the doctors were typing into the computer when we went for our own visits. So, and we know that happens in social agencies and it does, we felt it could possibly come between that relationship building activity that's so key and central to social work. And of course that ranked people, many people found that problematic, so we could go on and on, but I think that's, that gives you a sense of what we were, we were getting at.

Jessica Toft (00:27:34):

And I'm hearing that you're really tapping into those pieces of managerialism about the productivity. So then closing cases quickly doesn't mean that necessarily they're resolved well. Right. But they're closed quickly. And, you know, and so that those sort of pressures are problematic and the computer being between you and your client and the relationship building, these are the key aspects of social work, the relationship and quality outcomes and justice and equity, and those sort of get sort of squashed in this sort of a model. It seems like listening to you. So, but I'm interested in what you find out. I mean, you know, in terms of the, of the responses.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:28:14):

Well you've got it but you still have to foreshadow some other thing, which was great. So I'm going to start with that. So we had all of these items that we used. So we, we worked with the 30 of these items that reported, that were reported problematic by 50% of the people so that there was a whole nother set that we didn't analyze. Cause they were under 50% of the people reported them as problematic. These 30 items fell into four categories that you've been kind of referencing. And if they reflect the business model or what we call the logic of the market, we think the business model is the logic of the market. Those items that I'm going to mention now, or you find businesses talk about them all the time. So they are productivity or speed up. So that related things to the pace of work too much work too fast,

not enough time and 80% of the respondents, this, for each one of these items, 80% or more of respondents said they were problematic.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:29:14):

That was our highest number. That's huge. That's like almost everybody. The second one was accountability, which we called countdown. And here we have to say that everybody wants to be accountability, but in the past human service had a definition of accountability, which focused on professional ethics, community needs, social justice. Managerial, a business model accountability is different. It focuses on measuring, measuring quantifying performance outcomes, quantifying success, reporting, and documenting all this so that it can be reported to funders and to administrators. And so things about how much time spent tracking reporting use of measures 70 to 79% of people wrote said these were problematic efficiency. The third item was a biggest bang for the buck. We gave each one of them a nickname. And this meant using too much overuse of agency resources to save money or you know or to cut back on things to be efficient.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:30:19):

So the bottom line sort of focus on the bottom line, which interferes with the quality of service, basically in 53 to 77% of people said these were problematic. And then the last thing we looked at was standardization, which sort of a product of all this was the routinization of services. And we got at this by asking about the reliance on electronic data, prescribed evidence-based practices and ongoing documentation, all of which sort of takes the juice out of social work. What we know is social work and relationship building, and sort of creates rigid categories that we have to put people into. So in about 50 to 68%, so productivity, accountability, efficiency, and standardization are the four categories that the answers to these 30 items fell into. And that became sort of the framework for how we understand managers. And that also corresponds to the literature. I mean, you were referencing it and, and it's in the literature, these terms come up over and over again in the literature. So we felt like we had captured what was really going on the survey did.

Jessica Toft (00:31:27):

Yes. Have you had a chance to stand in front of a group of social service providers and present your findings and hear them respond to your work. And I'm wondering what that was like and what you heard?

Mimi Abramovitz (00:31:42):

Well, I think occasionally people raise issues. You know, some people, some people actually like this measurement, they think it makes us better. And to some extent that is a potential, but the way it's organized and carried out now, it sort of loses that capacity. Mostly people are nodding their heads. They're, we start hearing stories about, Oh, this is what happened to me. This is what happened. And at one of the sessions Jessica, three of us shared at the Council of Social Work Education. We asked people that question, we had them in groups and they're all educators. And they started talking about the same thing in the schools of social work. So it even goes there. So people just remember,it just came out. We didn't even ask them that. And it just, it just came out. So yes, it's, it resonates. I think Jen, you were going to add something about this.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:32:32):

Yeah, yeah. I was going to add another dimension. Yeah, no, I mean, I agree that it resonates and I feel like depending on the audience we were speaking with, you know, I would say that it's a very cathartic experience to be in a room where something that you're experiencing is identified and all of a sudden you're given, you know, the permission, and the voice to really start to talk about it. And so, we had originally called our survey, 'Your Voice is Needed'. And, you know, our idea was really giving voice to some of these problems, and giving a platform to people that wanted to talk about them without being labeled a complainer or somebody who wasn't going along with the program. And that's really been attention for a lot of people. I wanted to follow up on some of the things we found that were alarming though, because when, you know, what Mimi is talking about with productivity, efficiency, accountability, and standardization, these are really the methods for, you know, we call it operationalizing managerialism and it's really like, how is it done?

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:33:34](#)):

How are you going to move this abstract idea that we need to do more with less than we need to increase productivity specifically into the human services. And so, you know, this really gave us a chance to do that, but what we looked at our, participants, we noticed, you know, that managerialism was not being implemented equally in all workplaces. And so we wanted to get a, you know, the sense of how that was and how the degree of managerialism, we called it commitment to managerialism at the agency level, might correlate with some outcomes or some, you know, other problems people were reporting. And indeed we did find that. So we created a scale based on those 30 items. And we called it the Organizational Commitment to Managerialism Scale, which is a mouthful, but, you know, essentially we use the scale to take a look at service delivery.

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:34:29](#)):

You know, some of the things that agencies need to do as well as some of the important outcomes on clients and on the workforce. And we found, you know, really clear trend. And that trend really indicated that in the agencies where the commitment to managerialism was greater, we tended to see more problems, more adverse, identification of adverse issues for clients, such as, you know, lack of access to services. The feeling that people that the agency wasn't meeting the client's needs, some of the outcomes of burnout and turnover, which I'll talk about more in a moment. But on the other hand, we saw that agencies that had a lower commitment to managerialism were actually doing far better on some of these things. Particularly things like adhering to the social work mission, or, you know, focusing on relationship building with clients.

Jennifer Zelnik ([00:35:22](#)):

And so we came to think of these things as the logic of social work. And so, you know, to put it in a nutshell, we found that there was a contradiction between the commitment to managerialism and the logic of social work. At the same time, you know, on a positive side, we saw that agencies that had were less committed to doing the speed up and focusing on performance outcomes were able to retain a little bit more of the criteria and the things that really made social service agencies, places of safety, places where people can get their diverse needs met, you know, places where, human service workers are free to use their skills, whether they're professional, like an MSW or even, you know, not at that educational level, but just professional either from direct experience or years in the field. In all of these things that characterize our field, comprise the logic of social work. So, we were, we were relieved to see that, um, that there were still places where this was hanging on, and it was a really striking correlation between this commitment to manager was in score and the existence of, you know, logic of social work.

Jessica Toft (00:36:36):

That's really fascinating. And I'm wondering, if you happen to know in those organizations where they did not have such a commitment to managerialism, if they were funded a little differently than the other places, or if you've had a chance to look at that, to see whether or not how much contracting, maybe, you know, the tightening of the screws and that contracting allows. Yeah.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:36:59):

I think that's really for future research in the sense that, you know, we were cross-sectional, as I said, so it was like a point in time measure. We could see these associations, but we couldn't really look at the cause. But one thing that we were able to look at was sort of the distribution of this. And we did find that, in those services that tended to be more stigmatized populations, there tended to be a harsher discipline and a harsher use of managerialism. So, places that dealt with public assistance, people on public assistance, child welfare, substance abuse, homeless services tended to be more at the mercy of some of these practices, whereas, so-called, "deserving", you know, if you look at the history of social welfare policy. We we've tended to see some populations in our society as more, quote unquote, "deserving" of services. So youth populations, the elder population, uh, the education sector tended to be a little less constrained, by managerialism at least among our respondents. But again, I think that question that you're asking about what caused that difference needs to be fleshed out. Our survey, wasn't, we have some ideas, but it wasn't definitive,

Mimi Abramovitz (00:38:12):

I would just add to that, speculate, that whoever the funder was a public or a private, we didn't ask who the funder was so we really are not sure. But it anecdotally it doesn't seem to matter, funders of all kinds put these requirements on a place, a homeless person. And after nine visits, get someone to work, you know, real quickly. And so, the contracts are one way of carrying out that message and that's why they get a lot of attention, but it doesn't matter who the funders are. The contracts tell you what you have to do. And so they become a real burden because, a lot of agencies have six contracts and they will have different measures. And so it drives agency people more, not the frontline workers, they have to put the data in, but the people that will have to work, um, with the data up above it's just it's, it, it, it, it breaks, it, it, it, I don't know. I cannot find the word for it. It makes them tear their hair out.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:39:12):

Yeah, I would, yeah, I would add to that, that sometimes we see these things, even at the level of federal policy or state policy. So if you're thinking of child welfare, you know, we know we've had, you know, since the late eighties, a federal policy in place that says that you have a certain amount of time to get your act together as a parent or your parental rights will be terminated. You know, and this is an effort to, you know, adjust, to affect outcomes in the foster care system. And there's some, you know, reason to want to get things to move along. And yet, you know, some of these time limits and requirements on paper really make it difficult for parents and families to achieve certain goals under child welfare policies.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:39:53):

Public, or private, they're all funders, the state funds itself. So they're all, it all is built into the funding. If you don't do this, we're going to take your money away either as the agency. But you're also describing if you don't behave right as a client, we're going to take your money away or take your kids away. So, yeah, it's, it's very insidious. Maybe I should go onto this other thing we wanted to talk about, which was

an another alarming finding that we really weren't looking for, but when we analyze the data by race, we found some evidence of what we would felt comfortable calling institutionalized racism. So first of all, was the hierarchy that the people of color tended to be at the bottom and white people tend to be in the top level positions.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:40:42):

I'm not going to go through the numbers, but pretty much that's what it was. So you had that standard, what I call plantation hierarchy. But also people of color reported more, certain things were hitting people of color, harder, certain things that we were looking at, these things of these 30 items were, uh, hitting people harder and had to do with one, had to do with supervision. So if their supervisors here, listen to this, but don't take it as criticism. It's just part of the way that system works. ut lack of support, feedback and respect from supervisors, ranked very high among everybody, but higher among people of color, which that was the alarm bell there, lack of coworker support and not enough training. We understand that supervisors can provide the work and the feedback and the support they want to because they victims of managerialism as well.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:41:35):

So it trickles down through the whole system. So that, what was also interesting was that the two items, two of the items, we looked at what burnout and morale, this was high for everybody it did not come out higher for regardless of what your race was or how you identified as a race. But the people that were, persons of color had reported more concerns as more problematic things about lack of professional autonomy, ethical conflicts, thinking of leaving my job or turnover, job dissatisfaction, whole bunch of physical health issues and an unhealthy work environment. Always much more hearing more that these are more problematic high for everybody, but even higher for people of color. So if you think of these, these are structural things. These are not things that people are, they're structural things in the environment that managerialism intensifies exacerbates and maybe sometimes creates.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:42:30):

So it left us feeling that racial equity, maybe another casualty of managerialism that we did not look at them, but now given the black lives movement, Black Lives Matter movement, and what's going on today, it makes perfect sense that this is what we're seeing in our agencies. And we have to take care of internal racism as well as inside our profession. And just one other point, is that advocacy, we had this couple of questions about advocacy, and of course, managerialism and advocacy don't go so well together, given everything. So we said, when you have productivity efficiency, accountability, advocacy becomes constrained. And so there was very little time where resources left for advocacy. And again, more persons of color, however, were interested about agency not seeking input from clients in the community. Those were two of our measures of advocacy. So yeah, it's a real problematic picture here. So many things were alarming and if we had another two hours, we can go on and on.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:43:34):

I do want to point to a couple of things though, um, that, uh, just to close out that the commitment to managerialism because like what Mimi was talking about, you know, we did find a lot of trends that were exacerbated by race, but we also found that for everybody, in places where there was a higher commitment to managerialism, we saw worse impacts on the workforce. And these included things like burnout, morale, turnover, um, whether people were thinking of leaving their jobs, whether they felt that their work was important, whether they, you know, saw coworkers thinking of leaving their jobs,

um, whether they felt like they, their professional autonomy was respected. And so these were, I think the most devastating, some of the most devastating parts of our survey was to see, not just that these things were happening to people, but that people were, um, you know, feeling so devastated by them.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:44:32):

We also did some survey on health issues and we found a pretty strong correlation between managerialism stress and some other, measures of workplace health. And this is an area for, you know, social workers and social service workers that we don't always think about so much. There are health issues themselves, but then there's also a pathway from stress conditions to health issues. And it's something that, you know, anecdotally, I think people talk quite a lot about. You know, the other thing I wanted to mention, in regards to some of the racialized outcomes is that we saw certain health conditions were worse among our African-American and our Latin X participants. And then also that, more troubling we saw, reports of workplace violence that were, pronounced among some of these populations, as well as the feeling that if they wanted to see, you know, somebody's ear to hear about what was happening, that they would not be listened to. Um, and so again, this was among the most troubling things to see within our results. And it's a reason why we always talk about it when we present these results. Just so we have the opportunity to get the word out,

Mimi Abramovitz (00:45:53):

All these things that Jen just mentioned are exacerbated by race people of color experience at work, more and worse, find it more problematic. And also by whether the clientele is deserving and undeserving, which Jen was talking about. So in the child welfare public assistance. So the agencies that serve the most vulnerable people, the people who are hardest hit by inequality and poverty are also, are also the agencies that are most managerialist. So you see some of the, you know, it was just like COVID is revealing all the existing disparities Well, in some way, our look at managerialism revealed some existing disparities that we might not have thought of in the same way. We knew they were there, but it put it all together. We began to see that it's reproducing, the social services and managerialism was kind of reproducing huge problems that already exist in the field. And so that's, you know, that's sort of an added piece here that today's world is helping us see that even more clear that our study did that it's becoming clearer in today's world.

Jessica Toft (00:46:59):

It's really just listening to you talk about this. It becomes this conversation becomes so important in so many levels because we are researching and working in a field that is majority women and persons of color is a large portion of our workforce. So in positioning in society already, social workers tend to and social service providers tend not to have the power that many other professions in groups. So we are already sort of a disenfranchised profession within professions in a way. And that, and so it feels in a way that it's easier in some ways to institute this sort of method or governance strategy in such a profession. Where you, where the people maybe have not had the experience of being empowered. And I know in New York city, you have unions that are pretty active.

Jessica Toft (00:47:53):

In Minnesota I'm not sure what our percentage of social service providers are actually unionized. But the conversation that we're are having right now about naming these, this what's happening and how it works and, and using the language of managerialism and the ideas of incentivizing, sanctioning, and productivity, and questioning what roles supervisors have here in terms of being the interpreter of

neoliberal policy. That thing gets interpreted, and then is applied with direct line workers. These are things maybe that we as social workers or social service professionals haven't had a name for, but once we have a name for it, we can now start to talk about it more. We can start to do more things with it. And so I'm really happy to have this conversation with you and help get these tools. They're actually political tools that direct line workers can now use and talk about and think about within their work.

Jessica Toft (00:48:51):

So that's, I just wanted to say that out loud, cause I think that's really important, part of having empowered workforce. So, maybe, I don't know if, do you want to have any other editorial about what your vision of, what do you think the state of social services? What do we look like today under managerialism?

Mimi Abramovitz (00:49:15):

I would say if time is an issue that we've kind of answered that pretty much. I mean we might want to spend more time on the next question.

Jessica Toft (00:49:22):

Okay. Let's go for it. So what do you think social work and social workers should do then as a profession? We sort of, we started getting into this maybe a little bit to push back against neoliberal managerialism?

Mimi Abramovitz (00:49:35):

Perfect question after what you just said.

Jessica Toft (00:49:38):

I should have just gone to that one!

Jennifer Zelnik (00:49:40):

Right, I think, you know, I, so I think there's some practical steps within the workplace and within the spaces that we find ourselves in. And first of all, we need to listen to human service workers, right? Just as right now, we're saying we need to listen to these voices in the street that are telling us what their experiences are of these systems and these structures. We need to listen to human service workers speaking on behalf of themselves and the clients that they serve about what's really going on because we do find a lot of places where you know, workers are bending over backwards, finding ways to do the work that they want to do within this structure. And they are often making huge sacrifices of their own time and their own well-being, their own health. To deliver on the performance measurement side for their agency, but also to meet the clients where they are and satisfy their needs.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:50:35):

So I think we really need to listen to human service workers and our survey is one way to do that and we can create other ways to do that. And then ultimately I think we also need to have social work at the table when we're thinking about designing programs, designing you know, treatment goals, deciding what outcomes we're looking at from programs. I'm thinking about measurement and design, because in reality, this is the world that we're in now, and we are going to be, you know, pursuing evidence bases for the things that we do. And that's, that's all right and good, but we need to figure out how to do it on our own terms, as you were saying, we're a disempowered workforce. And if we are having these

negotiations in spaces where we lack power, then we are not going to get the outcomes that uphold, you know, the vision of the world that we need to do the job that we want to do.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:51:26):

So, you know, listening to human service workers, making sure we have a space at the table, whether that's a table that concerns research or policy or practice decisions, or community decisions, you know, we need, we need to be there. So that's, that's one area. The second is that sometimes we need to challenge the business model and sometimes we do that by bending the rules. You know, often people are not cooperating with the things they're being asked to do that are unrealistic. And, you know, we, we sort of tiptoed around this issue on our survey, but we found that many human service workers admitted that in their agencies, you know, people were fudging numbers. People were, you know, saying what they needed to say to get their reports in. So they get their funding knowing that it wasn't necessarily, you know, on par with what actually happened. Sometimes people were working overtime without pay in order to deliver the humanistic side of services that was really being stripped out of you know, of their time with clients and with people that they worked with. So these acts of bending the rules are also a form of resisting, you know, the box that managerialism is trying to put us in.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:52:41):

Yeah. And I want to add, there's another kind of resistance. These are kind of intentional things that people do. But I want to sort of go in just a little bit to the kind of things that we do, some of which Jen mentioned that you might not think of resistance. And even those may not be thought of, other things we do that might be resistance that, some of the people listening to this might even think that they're resisting, but you might want to reconsider after we talk about this. So, and this happens on the individual and on the collective way. So on and on the individual, basically some of the things that workers do, they basically expose managerialism as uncaring by virtue of the fact that to meet client needs, they have to work overtime without pay, which we found or that they take work home or that they work through their lunch hour.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:53:35):

They come in early, they skip sick leave, bring needed supplies from home. And so they're trying to extend the capacity of the agency of the social service agency to serve clients well. But they do it at their own expense. And so when, then when they do this, it has been interpreted. And we've started to think about this. It's been interpreted as they have to do all this to meet clients' needs and their behavior implicitly or explicitly, probably more implicitly unintentionally suggest that the agencies can't do the job that the agencies aren't, they're doing a job. Therefore I have to put this extra time in, I have to eat into my work, my family time and so on. And that they do it at their own expense. And so, they exposed managerialism as uncaring. And this is all put in the context of women's work because now these women are the caretakers.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:54:31):

Women are the most of the social workers and women are saying, we want to take care of, we want to do our care work and managerialism is getting in our way. So we have to basically do it ourselves at our own expense. And so the second one is, is that it's sort of related as that their work under there's other ways that they undercut the promise, they make of managerialism. So they're pushed by the demands of productivity, efficiency, accountability, somewhere, cause actually pushback. It could be unintentional pushback, or it could be intentional, we'd have to go with deep interviews about this, but they slow

down their work. They lower their performance to reclaim some time, some of the things they mentioned, they want more control over the work. They refuse to comply with paperwork demands, take long breaks.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:55:24):

Do non-work tasks at home, like make personal calls, use social media shop on, you know, online. So these, you don't think of these, we all do this. And I'd like people who are listening to think how much they do either of these, any of these things. But intentionally or not, it makes managerialism look bad. It makes manager, which is a form of resistance because managerialism has promised productivity, efficiency, accountability, and all these things undercut those outcomes. And so they make managerialism look bad. And so, um, so some of some people who who've studied the question of resistance, said these two things, are examples of resistance that we need to pay more attention to as workers ourselves or as observers of managerialism. And the other thing about this is that it's much of this is gendered because some of the things that women do they say, Oh, this is just what women do.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:56:22):

So it doesn't, it that's how it that's a gendered expectation that we would bend over backwards, take care of things on our own expense. That's what the society says. So there's a gender piece to this caring story. And so, yeah, so I think the intentional things like ignoring the rules, ignoring eligibility, all the things that requirements that Jen said, but then there are these more subtle versions, which we can think of and decide, we don't want to resist in these ways, or we want to puff it up a little bit and use it as a method of resistance, but that's, and that's another story, but I think it's a useful market to look at. But I just want to say one more thing collective and then so, and collective is more, we're more familiar with collective. So some agencies, they, collective is to say engage in advocacy, either one-on-one advocacy or community advocacy on behalf of the whole outreach. Some of them do this as part of the job. Some do it as you know, my day job is being a social worker. My off work, my off work job is I'm an activist. I'm an advocate, you know, or they formed, or they form professional associations, join trade unions, connect with social movements. They do social change work either inside the agency, through its mechanisms or outside because the social workers have a need to change things. Sorry, I cut you off.

Jessica Toft (00:57:47):

Yeah, no, I'm most interested in hearing what you have to say about it, but it was reminding when you were talking about, especially the individual direct line worker and you've presented, you know, the ways that people have to, how they deal with, being overworked. But I also think about Michael Lipski and Evelyn Brodkin and the street-level bureaucracies. And there's probably also a piece here where workers sometimes have to make decisions about efficiencies, based on, you know, those who really feel the, you know, the sanctioning power. And there are times where maybe they would've made a different decision about how they were treating a client or what if they had the time or if they had the support. And they know that that would be a better decision or outcome for the client, but because of the time factor, they find that they create actually routinized patterns of addressing these systematized problems that come to them, that they just rationalize themselves because of the, under this regime, I'm going to have to do it this way.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:58:46):

They have no choice.

Jessica Toft (00:58:47):

They have, they feel like they have no choice.

Jennifer Zelnik (00:58:50):

Yeah, I do think that's true. But I do think that we saw even in our data, some evidence that you know, where people could use their professional autonomy to make decisions about eligibility or, you know, fudge a couple of facts and get someone some services. They were still using that, you know, people are familiar with street level bureaucracy that, sort of, you know, power within the constraints that they had it in to, you know, help clients. And I think that is a key, you know, form of resistance still going on. But the space for doing that is shrinking as people are overworked and more surveillance is being done with their work also.

Mimi Abramovitz (00:59:29):

When we talked about bending the rules, that's exactly what we were talking about. Those are intentional things that are done. They may not call it, think of it as resistance, but bending the rules is bending the rules. And so, so, I'd just like to add one more thing, maybe to end on a positive note. That despite all this, despite all these problems that people are experiencing, despite the constraints and so on, we found optimism at the end, amazing optimism in our field. 80 to 90% of the people made optimistic. They said they believe in their program. They think their work is important. They believe that their work makes an important contribution to society. So this optimism is what we have to work with to try to make a profound change in our field and try to undo managerialism.

Jessica Toft (01:00:23):

Yes. Jen, do you want to add anything? You were thinking about,

Jennifer Zelnik (01:00:28):

You know, through the, through the conversation we've been having today and the points where we've touched on the current moment that we're in regarding, you know, COVID-19 and sort of what that's revealed about the underpinnings of our society followed up by, you know, the response to you know, police violence that has been mounting, you know, over so many years. You know, just the fact that through those efforts, we're really looking at systems; systems of health and systems of racism that we tolerate. And that we have lived with for so long. And in a way, what we're talking about here regarding managerialism is also a system, and it's a system of running our version of, you know, human services through this business model lens. And I think it's a good time to, you know, look at reframing that and to, you know, hopefully find that human service workers as women and as people of color, and as people who have come out of so many of the social problems and communities facing these problems that we've talked about, you know, that we can stand up too and look at you know, re-imagining these systems so that they can really do the work and the healing that we need to do.

Mimi Abramovitz (01:01:40):

Exactly. If I could just go back to my, just follow that up, because that's perfect to say that, as I tell my students in the beginning of the semester, if I can end our chat with what's done can be undone. And that's what we're talking about, changing those systems.

Jessica Toft (01:01:55):

That's wonderful and the final act of resistance is to have new ideas and imagine a different way. That neo-liberalism was an idea, right? And it just grew and grew over when we can have different ideas and we can try to Institute them and do different, have different systems of working with disenfranchised populations.

Mimi Abramovitz (01:02:17):

And actually many people are saying, and I think we're all thinking that at current the moment that they call it inflection period between COVID's exposing all the disparities and Black Lives Matters; and the failures of the government to take care of us. Everybody and society is opening a door to just what you said, a new policy imagination, where we can think of things either we're going to go towards something more progressive, or we're going to go to something more authoritarian. And we're at the point now where Americans, including social workers have to decide which side they're on and what they want to fight for.

Jessica Toft (01:02:55):

Well, with that, I want to thank you both for your expertise and your time today. It's been such a privilege to have this conversation with you. Please keep up your good work and we'll stay in touch. Thank you so much.

Mimi Abramovitz (01:03:09):

And thank you for the opportunity to air all these ideas and thoughts. It's been a real pleasure.

Jessica Toft (01:03:15):

Thank you.

New Speaker (01:03:18):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human services, children and family services division.