

Jessica Toft ([00:10](#)):

Hello, this is Jessica Toft assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota and principal investigator on the Impacts of Neoliberalism, a Minnesota social workers study. I'm here with PhD candidate, Ruti Soffner-Elnekave, who has been with the team for nearly three years in our previous podcast regarding the effects of neoliberalism on child welfare services. We focused on the findings from a scoping review that we conducted, where we summarized the literature that discussed what neoliberalism actually it is and how it interfaces with social work. Today, we wish to share with you brand new findings from a survey of all licensed social workers in the state of Minnesota, examining how neoliberal managerialism affects social workers working conditions. Ruti has been digging into the data specifically that impacts child welfare social workers in Minnesota.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([01:04](#)):

Yeah, but before we get into that, Jessica, could you tell us a little bit about the purpose of the survey in general?

Jessica Toft ([01:11](#)):

Yeah. There were really four big research questions. So in this survey we wanted to know what are the working conditions of Minnesota's direct line social workers related to neoliberal managerialism. How much professional discretion do Minnesota's direct line social workers have under neoliberal managerialism? Is there evidence of worker resistance to neoliberal managerialism and if so, in what ways, and do these vary bi-sectors such as public or private, nonprofit and private for profit.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([01:43](#)):

So I know how hard it is to grasp what exactly neoliberalism is. Could you start us off with some background? So we remember

Jessica Toft ([01:50](#)):

Yes. Remember it's not an easy concept, but an important one. So, neoliberalism is really a governing logic and it applies market logic and business principles to social and really all political arenas, including social welfare administration and management. So neoliberal managerialism has had a significant impact on the profession of social work in general. At the legislative policy level, social programs have been cut drastically. They've been devolved to states from the federal government through block grants and they frequently require work or other behavior, of a client or recipient in order to receive services. At the state rule making level, private providers must agree to performance contracts to deliver services while competing with providers to get these services. So this encourages entrepreneurial or what we might call competitive management, which includes standardization of practice and performance measures and an emphasis on cutting costs and, and really disciplining workers.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([02:56](#)):

Wow. Okay. So what that, what can, what does that actually look like for social workers?

Jessica Toft ([02:59](#)):

Well, neoliberalism can take different shapes and forms, but generally it means that management prioritizes productivity and efficiency goals over the quality of services. So they're interested in really the speed of work emphasis on paperwork, taking on more clients of the workers and et cetera. Also

employing worker surveillance and monitoring of practices, such as tracking workers computer, and phone usage. Also ideas such as like using incentives and sanctions to modify worker behavior and evaluate performance. And finally implementing standardization of client intervention methods and practice goals, which is also seen in paperwork. So these sorts of ways that these kind of management practices bring into question really just how much professional discretion under these conditions do social workers have.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([03:52](#)):

Yeah. So what is professional discretion? That's another term you've been using?

Jessica Toft ([04:01](#)):

Yeah. I don't know if many professions really could define what a profession is, which I think is interesting. So let me, let me do that here. Let's just define what professions are. So it has actually been argued that professions in their ideal form support and protect civil society or the common good. We can think about professions like teachers and nurses in this light too Benefitting the public aims of education and health of the people. And we can think about social work in this way too. In fact, professions offer protection against pressures of the market, you know, simply making a profit and the state simply maintaining social order. So they're , in their ideal form, professions offer a counter pressure. So professional logic offers credibility to these group of workers. So professions claim, legitimacy, and credibility through their expert knowledge and skills that were required through rigorous classroom education , application of this knowledge in the field with expert supervision and adherence to a code of ethics. That places clients and society's wellbeing before the workers. So in theory, professions involve work so complex that it can only be undertaken by those with the required education and experience. So therefore if there's a need for discretion and practice. And this is especially true for professions that work directly with people who are not static objects but dynamic human beings, and can't be completed. And so in essence work cannot be completely or even mostly preplanned and standardized.

Jessica Toft ([05:37](#)):

So in social work, professional discretion is the ability of a social worker. We think about social workers to employ their range of professional knowledge, skills, and ethics in their practice under the authority of the profession that society has legitimized. And more than merely avoiding improper practice, professional responsibility requires that social workers actively engage proper practice. So taking into account social workers, defining theories skills and ethics. We define social work professional discretion as the ability to adhere to the profession's code of ethics, to implement the ecological framework are probably our most signifying, uh, theoretical framework to build trusting relationships with clients, to collaborate with other agencies in providing the best service to address clients' issues at the macro level. And to use a socio and political, historical lens to shape practice, to understand that we're really stepping into a moving rather than working with a static, snapshot in terms of a person's life, a history of groups in which people belong. And then also the ability to advocate on behalf of clients or against unjust policies.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([06:56](#)):

So does using professional discretion or engaging in professional discretion require pushing back against unreasonable workplace demands sometimes?

Jessica Toft ([07:06](#)):

Yeah, so we wanted to see if social workers were also resisting any of the Neoliberal practices that they were experiencing. So, which could be seen as really an extension of professional discretion. So we define resistance as loosely interpreting guidelines, practicing outside of agency approved interventions and even altering performance reports. And these things have been studied in at least one other study in this way. Also, resistance could include expressing disagreement to social work, to other coworkers or to management directly or organizing with other workers and sort of a collective action within organizations in various ways. Another way that we thought about it, it could be that social workers are contacting their professional associations to resist, or maybe even thinking about contacting the social work licensing board. Since it's a means of protecting the public. Maybe this was also another avenue social workers we're trying to use, and then finally as a more institutionalized version of resistance. We were also interested to hear if workers were unionized or if they were interested in being unionized.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([08:09](#)):

That all sounds very interesting, but I'm just wondering, is this study different from previous studies and social workers working conditions? How is it different?

Jessica Toft ([08:19](#)):

Yeah, well, that's a good question, Ruti. Most social work workforce studies conducted by state professional are conducted by state of professional institutions and they often focus on recruitment, pay burnout or turnover. And research on child welfare workers has highlighted issues such as poor training quality, problems with work family balance, loaded job satisfaction, burnout and retention and high turnover. However, few studies examined the ways management specifically neoliberal managerialism may impact child welfare social workers, and there are precious few studies that examine issues with supervisors, high workloads, excessive stress, and insufficient pay. So this really is an emerging area of research in the United States and needs much more development. So Rudy, you looked at all this in relation to child welfare social workers. And I'm wondering if you could tell about that?

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

Yeah. So as part of the survey, we specifically identified child welfare, social workers and examined their experiences of neoliberal managerialism. So previous studies for the most part have highlighted problems that seem to center on worker issues such as work family balance, lack of commitment to the workplace, low job satisfaction, burnout and high turnover, like you said. Few studies examine how neoliberal managerial practices themselves affect social workers' assessment of their working conditions. So today we would like to discuss our findings on the effects of neoliberal managerialism on the working conditions and professional discretion of child welfare social workers.

Jessica Toft ([09:54](#)):

Now that we discuss the background and the aims of the study, we can start by talking about what we found and Rudy, I'm hoping that you could tell us a little bit about our sample.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([10:03](#)):

Yes, of course. So this survey was sent to all licensed social workers in the state of Minnesota, which is over 15,000 workers. Of which 3,663 responded and completed it, which is, is a really great amount of people. From these 18% worked in settings related to children and families and 157 of them were direct

line social workers in child welfare settings. Of those, 47%, which is 73 workers worked in child protection; 33% of the participants worked in child and family welfare services and 11% in adoption services. An additional 8% worked in foster care services. A total of 80% of these workers worked in the public sector. And 17%, mostly nonprofit worked in the private nonprofit sector.

Jessica Toft ([11:00](#)):

Well, and if I could just add one thing here, we see that 80% of child welfare, social workers who took the survey work in the public sector. And this is pretty incredible since in counties social workers have a licensing exemption. So those social workers who took this survey are those social workers who chose to become licensed, even though they don't have to.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([11:20](#)):

Yeah. And of these, 70% worked in urban communities and 39% worked in rural communities. 1% indicated they worked in suburban communities. Additionally, 125 were women, 10 were men. And one identified as transgender. Their ages range from 22 to 72 with a mean of 39. And, 87% identified as white five and a half percent as black or African American or African and 3% as American Indian, or Alaska native 2% as Hispanic and 2% as Asian.

Jessica Toft ([12:03](#)):

Okay. So what did you find when you looked at the child welfare social worker data specifically? Let's start with the first research question on the effects of managerialism on working conditions.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([12:12](#)):

So we first looked to see the extent to which our welfare workers experience neoliberal managerialism. We developed 14 measures based on previous research theory and experience. Our measures looked into several indicators of neoliberalism. One, the use of incentives and sanctions, two monitoring practices, three prioritization and productivity and efficiency of productivity and efficiency. Four is impactful practice decisions. And our fifth scale measured workers, burnout and retention, sixth scales look into how many hours were work workers working without pay to meet the requirements of their job. We also measured workers burnout and the intention, their intention to leave their jobs. And the findings are really, really interesting. So first regarding to the use of incentives and sanctions, we found that 33% of child welfare social workers reported that they were sanctioned monetarily if performance goals weren't met and 65 per percent reported increased oversight, if performance goals weren't met.

Jessica Toft ([13:21](#)):

Wow. That's interesting. Um, and well, let's move along on the scale here. So, um, what about the other scales let's talk about that.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([13:28](#)):

Yeah. When looking into monitoring of workers, we found that child welfare workers felt monitored in different ways that this varied by sectors. Generally public sectors workers felt more monitored than private sector workers and all child welfare workers felt more monitored than the larger sample of direct line workers in general. For instance, some workers reported that their computer usage in emails were monitored to some extent and 25% of the workers reported that management track their

locations. A concerning finding was that 18 to 25% of the child welfare workers were not sure whether or not they were being monitored. And if so, in what ways.

Jessica Toft ([14:08](#)):

That is interesting probably at the core of managerialism is this pressure to be productive or efficient. I'm wondering what you found related to that scale. What did that look like?

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([14:17](#)):

So the child welfare workers in our study did describe that they were under increased pressure to get more done, take on more clients and close cases quickly. Additionally, 42% of the participants reported that their performance was evaluated based on efficiency rather than practice. And 58% reported that paperwork work was prioritized over practice to at least some extent. These findings show what we were worried about and that neoliberal pressures and mechanisms are in fact putting excessive pressures on workers. Emphasizing productivity and efficiency over quality of practice. Additionally, in the literature related to efficiencies this idea of total responsibility of workers for client outcomes. In our sample workers reported that management placed complete responsibility for client outcomes on workers in alarming rates. 43% stated from some to a very great extent. In addition, we found that many workers were feeling burnout symptoms. To be exact, 20% experienced constant burnout symptoms of frustration. 33% felt one or more symptoms such as physical and emotional exhaustion and 41% felt occasional stress. I'm sorry to say that only 6% did not report any symptoms of burnout.

Jessica Toft ([15:38](#)):

Yeah, this is, it's concerning. And I'm wondering, what else did you find to be affecting working conditions?

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([15:46](#)):

So what, one of the things we did was we developed a scale that explored the extent to which management had control over workers' practice decisions. So for instance, we asked workers to indicate the extent to which management set practice goals for clients, whether they determine the set of practices or interventions that were allowed, whether or not they emphasized workers' performance outcomes rather than practice or set the total number of sessions or length of relationship with clients. Or determine the length of time allowed per client meeting. Our findings for this measure provide, provide some insight. I think so 29% of the respondents stated that management set the length of time they could work with clients and 31% stated that management set the total number of sessions or length of relationship with clients. On the other hand, 81% indicated that management set the range of practices or interventions with clients, from some extent, to a very great extent. Outcomes rather than practice itself, seem to be emphasized from some to a very great extent among 49% of respondents. And another 54% reported those outcomes are set by management from some to a very great extent. So that's a lot of numbers. In other words, we can say that among this child welfare and mostly public sector group, most participants indicated that they have strong discretion in the length of client meetings and relationship, yet child welfare social workers themselves based on management influence, do not have as much discretion in the goals of the intervention or the methods to be used.

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

Okay, this, well, this is unfortunate, you know, and, but it and intriguing, but it, it seems to lead to our discussion about professional discretion then. So, related to our second research question, how much professional discretion do child welfare workers, social workers have in Minnesota?

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([17:44](#)):

Yes, these concepts are very closely related. So to measure professional discretion, we developed and piloted a scale using the dimensions outlined earlier in the podcast, we asked workers to indicate to what extent they were able to practice their professional values of social workers, as stated in the NASW code of ethics. How they were able to incorporate the ecological framework in assessment, to build trusting relationships with the people they served, tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs, engage with other agencies in supporting their clients and address clients issues at the macro level. So for this scale, we found that child welfare social workers had a mean score of 26.2 out of 35. So on the professional discretion scale, it's just a score that was just under the greater sum sample of direct direct service workers, which had a mean of 27.2. So although the score wasn't very low, it was still not a high one.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([18:45](#)):

Yeah. So for instance, 30% of the child welfare workers indicated that they were able to address clients' issues at the macro level, from a moderate to a great extent. Another 54% said they could do so to small or to some extent, and 14.6% indicated they didn't engage on the macro level at all. Another finding was that 17% of the participants indicated they were only able to adhere to their professional values as social workers to some or small extent, and almost 40% indicated that they could incorporate ecological frameworks only to a small or some extent. So although 52% of the workers did indicate that they were able to build trusting relationships with their clients, which is great to a very great extent, 14% indicated they were able to do so only to some or small extent and 33% indicated they were able to do so to a moderate extent. So overall, we can say the child welfare workers, professional discretion was limited

Jessica Toft ([19:50](#)):

Indeed and it sounds like a number of the things that you mentioned, building trusting relationships, focusing on the macro level, you know, choosing what interventions to use have been compromised and significant ways. And so, I'm wondering if there's anything else that you would like to add about that.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([20:10](#)):

So actually, related to professional discretion, we also wanted to know if workers experience conflict between their practice reality and social work ethics. So it was overwhelming to see that over half of the respondents indicated that they do in fact, experience conflict between their professional ethical values and their work to at least some extent. 11% experience conflict to a greater, very great extent. And only 16% of the participants did not experience any conflict of values. Interestingly, public sector workers experienced more value conflict than private sector workers. I thought that was surprising. This also relates to our findings regarding worker's perceptions of their own effectiveness in meeting the goals of their clients. So although more than half of the participant, 58% indicated that they felt effective in meeting the goals of their, or very great extent, 42% of child welfare social workers felt they were only effective to a small or moderate extent in meeting those goals of their clients. So this is very concerning, to me and needs further understanding and interpretation.

Jessica Toft ([21:19](#)):

Absolutely. And you know, this also just brings me then to the next logical question, which is, you know, resistance. Our child welfare workers, social workers, demonstrating disagreement or resistance in their workplace, given this.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([21:37](#)):

Well, this is a tough question. Again, we measured a variety of ways to demonstrate resistance and ask them how frequently they participated in these events. Our means score for this scale was 12.5 out of a total of 26. So that seems pretty low. At the same time, the scores, the mean score as we found for the larger sample of direct, it was the same mean score that we found for the larger sample of direct line social workers. So that means something.

Jessica Toft ([22:04](#)):

Okay. Yeah.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([22:05](#)):

So the most common way to demonstrate disagreement was to express it among coworkers, which was overwhelming 95%. Yeah.

Jessica Toft ([22:14](#)):

Makes sense.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([22:14](#)):

And this was followed by expressing disagreement to management. And the least thing participants did was contact the board of social work or their professional associations. 46% did indicate expressed disagreement among coworkers to at least somewhat frequently. In addition 48.5% indicated that they never loosely interpreted guidelines.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([22:41](#)):

While 51% did so on occasion and somewhat frequently.

Jessica Toft ([22:45](#)):

Wow.

New Speaker ([22:46](#)):

71% indicated they never practiced outside management approved guidelines while 29% did so on occasion or somewhat frequently. Another 51% of workers indicated they never organized with coworkers when disagreeing with management policies. 49% indicated that they did organize with workers on occasion or somewhat frequently. So overall, we can say that workers did not engage in a lot of ways to resist neoliberal and managerialism practices, which is a very intriguing finding. So while social workers tend to talk among themselves, when they disagree and sometimes loosely interpret guidelines and practice outside of management approved practices, and even speak individually with management, they are less likely to use more powerful tactic of collective organizing within their organizations.

Jessica Toft ([23:39](#)):

Yes. That sort of, it makes sense, but also it does beg some questions about, you know, that individuals seem to be more confident in resisting, you know, by themselves rather than organizing in groups, especially related to professional discretion. So this leads me to maybe more, an institutionalized form of resistance, which would be union membership. So what were the findings for child welfare protection workers there?

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([24:04](#)):

Yes. So we asked the workers whether or not they belonged to a union and if so, how protected they felt. 42% of participants were members of a union of which most 71% felt they were protected to a moderate, great or very great extent. Of the participants who were not members of a union, 74% indicated that they somewhat agree or agree or strongly agree that they would join a union if available, which is interesting. Yeah. The remaining 26% of the participants indicated that they were not interested in joining a union at all. So research does show that public sector employees are the most likely to be unionized among the sectors. This sample reflects that interestingly, nearly a quarter, we're also members of professional associations; perhaps demonstrating that there is an interest in staying connected to their profession.

Jessica Toft ([24:58](#)):

Well yes you know, I wanna highlight that, you know, public unions are, a, our protective of workers as part of a larger group of public employees, just, just besides social workers so that they may do a great job of protecting wages and benefits, sort of common interests across different kinds of workers, but one wonders about their ability really to advocate for professional discretion. These are all really, they're very interesting findings. And I'm wondering, what can we learn about this, about the working conditions of child welfare social workers in Minnesota overall, what would you say?

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([25:28](#)):

So this is the first study that we know of to explore these concepts of neoliberal managerialism among licensed social workers to this extent. And we are just starting to understand the meaning of these findings and the extent to which neoliberal managerialism is impacting our services and our profession. However, we can now say that neoliberal managerialism is impacting child welfare social workers. So workers are experiencing a type of sanctions and incentives from management due to performance benchmarks. Although not financially, they're constantly monitored even more than other social workers. And they're under increased pressure to be productive and efficient many times at the expense of professional practices. So although child welfare, social workers are experiencing lower levels of management control regarding length of relationship with clients and meeting length, management is highly involved in determining the kinds of practice methods used and the practice goals that are set.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([26:29](#)):

We also saw that child welfare workers in the sample experience, less professional discretion than the larger sample with regard to goals and methods. If these workers were supervised by senior social workers at higher rates than the larger sample. Which does raise questions about social work supervisors, ability to employ their professional discretion, child welfare workers in the public sector experience high levels of discrepancy between professional values and the requirements of their organizations. And while union membership of child welfare workers was higher than for the larger sample. Workers demonstrated little resistance to neoliberal managerialist practices and less than half engaged in advocacy on behalf of their clients.



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

Wow.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([27:13](#)):

So Jessica, I'm wondering now what you think this means for child welfare social workers.

Jessica Toft ([27:18](#)):

Yeah. Listening to you talk about this in detail, I'm struck by the simultaneous managerialist pressures to standardize work and the lack of support for professional discretion. You know in a democratic society, like we said earlier, the public legitimizes professions based on their expert knowledge, their skills and adherence to a code of ethics. And so for professions that work with managerialized populations, such as children and families in poverty, and the ability to carry out these responsibilities really requires professional discretion. And this study shows that important aspects of professional discretion are compromised in these situations and child welfare, social workers have less ability to engage skills and knowledge. And at times adhere to their code of ethics that constitutes social work practice. I think this is troubling.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([28:09](#)):

I agree. So I'm wondering what we should be doing differently then. What are the next steps for child welfare, social workers?

Jessica Toft ([28:15](#)):

Well, you know, we're in a critical time in history where we have to look carefully at the systems that surround us and ask ourselves what might be done differently. And certainly there are many different groups that are doing this right now. And in the workplace, we can highlight the effects of neoliberal managerialism. We can inform colleagues and supervisors and management, and just start talking about these concepts. And we can organize among coworkers and advocate for change within our organizations. And organizing within our own institutions is one other avenue to create change and promote workers' professional discretion and their working conditions. Professional associations may have the power to assist and be helpful. And they have, and maybe the tools to advocate on behalf of workers and a platform to advocate. You know, unionization is an interesting idea.

Jessica Toft ([29:03](#)):

We talked about that briefly. It's a way that other human serving professions, such as nurses and teachers have taken a stand to address both their working conditions and their professional discretion. You can think about campaigns for the benefit of students and the benefit of patients, but we are not sure in what way social workers might be leveraging the power of the unions that they do belong to. So it may be more about salary than professional discretion. So, you know, we'll need to look at this and consider this further and further research, you know, and additionally future research, should examine the effects of neoliberal managerialism on child welfare clients themselves, and how it might affect our mission to promote children and family's wellbeing. This is our central and most important concern.

Ruti Soffner-Elnekave ([29:51](#)):

Wow. That was great. Thank you for helping us understand all of this and thinking together about what we should be doing.

Jessica Toft ([29:57](#)):

Well, Ruti thank you for your analysis and your expertise on child welfare social workers in this area. And you know, I'd like to really thank, I know our whole team would like to thank the social workers that participated in the working condition survey. This is the one of the first pieces to come out of it. There's gonna be a lot more. And I would also like to thank the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare for their sponsorship and funding of this project, as well as the University of Minnesota Agricultural Experimental Station, from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Minnesota through a grant and aid. And thank you to all our listeners who are concerned about this and care about this particular issue. And we're wishing you well in your own practice and in your lives. Take care. Thank you.

New Speaker ([30:50](#)):

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