

# RURAL SOCIAL WORKERS' PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION AND RESISTANCE UNDER NEOLIBERAL MANAGERIALISM

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## FACT SHEET #4: Managerialism, Professional Discretion, and Resistance among Rural Social Workers

### BACKGROUND:

Rural communities receive little attention in social work research, despite being often classified as underserved.<sup>1</sup> The application of business management principles to social work practice—known as neoliberal managerialism—may impact quality of service delivery. Managerialism includes pressures for worker efficiency and productivity, monitoring of work, introduction of incentives and sanctions, and pre-determined practice methods and goals in rural communities.<sup>2</sup>

**Rural social workers** have fewer social service options, larger distances, and often larger caseloads than their urban counterparts.

Managerialism contradicts **professionalism**. Professions are granted autonomy because the work is complex, requiring specialized knowledge, adherence to professional ethics, and professional supervision. Ideally, professionals have discretion

to utilize their knowledge, values, and skills to protect against pressures of market (productivity) and state (standardization and efficiency).

Studies on social worker professional discretion and resistance within the neoliberalized workplace are relatively new. **Resistance** can be thought of as a four-category array of actions or communications: hidden-individual, hidden-collective, public-individual, and public-collective.<sup>3</sup> Early research in New York City reported mostly hidden forms of resistance: loosely interpreting guidelines, practicing outside of approved interventions, altering performance reports, slowing work pace, and shirking paperwork expectations.<sup>4</sup> Are patterns similar in rural areas?

Rural areas have fewer social services and rural social workers may carry higher caseloads while covering vast areas.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, rural social workers may be uniquely impacted by the pressures of managerialism. How do rural direct-line social workers experience professional discretion within the neoliberalized workplace and resist the pressures of managerialism? Although much of Minnesota is rural, little scholarship examines the experiences of **rural social workers under neoliberal managerialism**.

### Our study asks:

- 1. To what extent do rural, direct-line social workers experience managerialism?**
- 2. To what extent are rural, direct-line social workers able to exercise their professional discretion?**
- 3. To what extent are rural, direct-line workers resisting managerialism?**

## THE SAMPLE

A total of 220 respondents identified as rural and direct-line:

### Gender

- 93% female
- 6.5% male
- 0.5% non-binary

### Race

- 96% White
- 1% Black/African American/African
- 0.5% Hispanic/Latinx
- 05% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 2% Multiracial

### Education

- 42% BSW
- 57% MSW
- 1% PhD/DSW

### Income

- \$0 – \$40,000 (14%)
- \$40,001 – \$60,000 (37%)
- \$60,001 – \$80,000 (41%)
- \$80,001 – \$100,000 (6%)
- \$100,001+ (3%)

### Sector

- 52% work in public
- 37% work in non-profit
- 1% work in for-profit
- 10% work in “other”

## FINDINGS

### 1. TO WHAT EXTENT DO RURAL, DIRECT-LINE SOCIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCE MANAGERIAL SIM?

**Table 1: The extent to which management pressures rural social workers to:**

Productivity and Efficiency	Not Problematic (%)	Problematic (%)	n
Get more done in same amount of time	62 (33.0)	126 (67.0)	188
Take on more clients	61 (32.4)	127 (67.6)	188
Close cases quickly	144 (76.6)	44 (23.4)	188
Select clients based on likely positive outcomes	174 (92.6)	14 (7.5)	188
Drop clients who do not perform well	172 (91.5)	16 (8.5)	188
Evaluated performance based on efficiency over quality	114 (60.6)	74 (39.4)	188
Prioritize paperwork over practice	97 (51.6)	91 (48.4)	188
<b>Standardization of Practice</b>			
Set practice/treatment goals for clients	114 (60.6)	74 (39.4)	188
Allow clients' input in determining practice/treatment goals	104 (55.6)	83 (44.4)	187
Determine set of practices/interventions allowed with clients	81 (43.5)	105 (56.5)	186
Determine the length of time allowed per client meeting	124 (66.3)	63 (33.7)	187
Require evidence-based practice interventions	56 (30.1)	130 (69.9)	186
Emphasize my performance outcomes rather than my practice	96 (51.3)	91 (48.7)	187
Set the total number of sessions or length of relationship	150 (80.6)	36 (19.4)	186

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"

**Problematic** = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent"

#### TAKEAWAYS:

- About two-thirds reported they were expected to get more done within the same amount of time
- Nearly 70% reported they were expected to take on more clients
- 70% reported evidence-based practice interventions were required to a problematic extent
- Over 55% reported their ability to determine practices and interventions with clients was limited to a problematic extent

Overall, rural, direct-line social workers reported more problematic practices in the arena of productivity and efficiency, and fewer issues with standardized practice decisions. Most evident is the apparent pressure to work faster and take on more clients.

#### Employment Sector

- 52% work in public
- 37% work in non-profit
- 1% work in for-profit
- 10% work in "other"

## 2. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE RURAL, DIRECT-LINE SOCIAL WORKERS ABLE TO EXERCISE THEIR PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION?

Table 2: The extent to which rural social workers are able to:

Measure	Not Problematic n (%)	Problematic n (%)	n
<b>Professional Discretion</b>			
Practice professional values as a social worker	130 (65.3)	69 (34.7)	199
Incorporate the ecological framework in assessment	70 (36.1)	124 (63.9)	194
Build trusting relationships with people served	145 (72.9)	54 (27.1)	199
Tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs	121 (60.8)	78 (39.2)	199
Engage with other agencies in supporting clients	90 (45.2)	109 (54.8)	199
Address clients' issues at the macro level	22 (11.1)	177 (88.9)	199
Shape practice on social, economic, and political history	33 (16.6)	166 (83.4)	199
<b>Advocacy</b>			
Advocate for specific clients	188 (95.9)	8 (4.1)	196
Advocate for issues that affect clients	162 (88.0)	22 (12.0)	184
Advocate for social policies that benefit clients	106 (54.1)	90 (45.9)	196
Join/Mobilize stakeholders for social change	73 (37.2)	123 (61.8)	196

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"

**Problematic** = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent"

### TAKEAWAYS:

- Almost 90% of respondents reported their ability to address client issues at the macro level was limited to a problematic extent
- Over 80% reported their ability to shape practice according to client social/economic/political history was limited to a problematic extent
- Over 60% of respondents reported their ability to incorporate the ecological framework in assessment was limited to a problematic extent
- Just over 60% reported their ability to join/mobilize stakeholders for social change was limited to a problematic extent
- More than half of respondents reported their ability to engage with other agencies in support of clients was limited to a problematic extent

Overall, rural, direct-line workers cited numerous, significant limitations to professional discretion. Most notably, respondents identified that their ability to engage, assess, and intervene on behalf of clients within a macro context was severely limited. Most felt their ability to join and intervene with clients on the micro context was not significantly impacted.

### Ability to Advocate

The vast majority of rural, direct-line social workers felt they could advocate on behalf of specific clients, and specific client issues. Only half felt they could advocate for social policies that benefited clients, and just over a third felt they could mobilize stakeholders for change.

### 3. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE RURAL, DIRECT-LINE SOCIAL WORKERS RESISTING?

Table 3: When disagreeing with management's policies, rural social workers:

Measure	Never Done n (%)	Has Done n (%)	n
<b>Resistance</b>			
Loosely interpreted eligibility and assessment guidelines	88 (48.1)	95 (51.9)	183
Practiced outside of management approved interventions	126 (68.9)	57 (31.1)	183
Altered my performance reports	171 (93.4)	12 (6.6)	183
Organized with co-workers	85 (46.7)	97 (53.3)	182
Expressed disagreement to management	20 (11.0)	162 (89.0)	182
Expressed disagreement among co-workers	17 (9.3)	165 (90.7)	182

Note: **Never Done** = "Never"; **Has Done**="On occasion," "Somewhat frequently," and "Frequently."

#### TAKEAWAYS:

- Over 90% expressed disagreement among co-workers
- Almost 90% expressed disagreement to management
- Over half of respondents reported organizing with coworkers against management policies.
- Just over 50% of respondents reported loosely interpreting eligibility and assessment guidelines

Overall, most respondents did not report altering performance reports and less than a third reported practicing outside of management approved interventions. The primary modes of reported resistance were expressing disagreement to co-workers and management.

## CONCLUSION

Rural social work practice is an understudied practice setting and rural communities are often underserved. Given the increasing presence of neoliberal managerialism in social work, an understanding of how this phenomenon specifically impacts rural social work is essential. Most prominent in our study is rural social workers' apparent lack of ability to intervene on behalf of clients on the macro level. The most prominent modes of resistance expressed among respondents were expressing disagreement among co-workers and management, the first of which could be classified as hidden-collective resistance and the second public-individual resistance. In general, rural, direct-line social worker responses were similar to those of metro direct-line social workers in Minnesota. More research is needed to understand how these phenomena operate in rural social work and how it may impact direct practice.

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