

Social workers and their understanding of neoliberalism, advocacy, and othering

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: As part of advocating for clients, it is a requirement for social workers to understand structures and power bases which sustain social injustices. This article summarises a study which aimed to understand how neoliberalism affected the ability of social workers to provide support and advocacy to disadvantaged people.

METHODS: This article reports on the findings of a qualitative-exploratory study. The data were collected via eight semi-structured interviews with social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand; data were analysed thematically.

FINDINGS: A key finding of the research was that social workers have limited understanding of neoliberalism, are placing themselves at risk of sustaining neoliberalism, and are engaging in "othering" discourses towards their clients.

CONCLUSION: The research illustrates the presence of neoliberalism, evidenced through increased compliance and standardisation of social work practice. A neoliberal blindness paradox exists; social workers are frustrated that neoliberalism impacts their work but place neoliberal messaging on their clients when encountering structural injustice. Social workers identify change as possible within their local communities but require greater leadership to engage in this advocacy. Further research into social workers' understanding of neoliberalism and how this affects their worldview would offer further insight into their capacity to engage in social change.

Keywords: Advocacy; neoliberalism; othering; ethical responsibilities

This article is based on a Master of Arts (Social Policy) research project which explored how neoliberalism impacts on social workers' abilities to provide support and advocacy to disadvantaged families and give voice to their experiences practising in a neoliberal environment. The goals of the study were to: (1) understand community-based social workers' views about risk and vulnerability; (2) gain insight into how the focus on risk and vulnerability has changed community-based social workers' practice;

(3) explore community-based social workers' understanding of their roles as advocates; and (4) discuss opportunities for community-based social workers to act as advocates to enhance their services for disadvantaged families. To note, there was a deliberate decision made at the start of this research to focus on social work advocacy without drawing on issues impacting on Māori. Colonisation has produced many adverse wellbeing concerns for Māori and now neoliberalism has shaped societal thinking

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into blaming Māori for being marginalised and vulnerable (Henrickson, 2022). These unique implications for Māori warrant a distinct study, though this research lays the conceptual groundwork for further exposition.

This article reviews literature about neoliberal discourses in social work, noting the dominance of individual social work practice within heavily managerialist workplaces. There is a brief discussion of the methodology and methods used in the qualitative-exploratory approach, including thematic analysis of the participant accounts using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase process. The findings are presented before engaging with the existing literature to offer new insights, revealing a neoliberal blindness paradox within participant narratives.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, neoliberalism has shaped the social policies within which social workers engage. In the last decade, this saw the introduction of the fifth National-led government's social Investment programme to reduce future liabilities, which included reducing social welfare spending by targeting those beneficiaries identified as being the biggest drain on welfare expenditure, and moving them into employment (Baker & Cooper, 2018). The social investment programme also resulted in community services purchasing outcomes and requiring evidence of the service's effectiveness. The nature of outcomes-focused contracts meant that community services had to operate in uncertainty regarding long-term planning for the provision of support and workplace development (Boston & Gill, 2017).

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (ANZASW) defines advocacy as a process which seeks to influence social, economic, and political systems (2017). Advocacy is a requisite for social workers, with the Social Workers Registration Board (2020) requiring social

workers to advocate for social and economic justice and to understand the structural causes of injustice. However, neoliberalism requires impoverished people to move themselves out of poverty through hard work. It then comes down to a choice of individual self-interest if one wants to improve their own living standards (Stanley-Clarke, 2016). Social workers therefore need to direct their advocacy towards persuading the powerful to change their response towards an issue in a way that empowers their client (Wilks, 2012). Hyslop and Keddell (2018) described how society saw these individuals, who have not taken responsibility for their lives and have used government support, as "other" people; those who have less character than hard-working New Zealanders. Othering has been defined as a process of alienation of "a person we do not wish to be and will never be" (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 300). Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) outlined a sociological process in which othering is achieved through the establishment of stereotypes, isolation of behaviour from the context in which it exists as a way to remove reasoning for behavioural choices, historical factors are ignored, and the imposition of a narrative which appears to be self-evident. How is it, then, that social workers advocate for their clients within this context?

Neoliberal discourses in social work

Neoliberalism has created a new social ontology, a discourse which has established seemingly self-evident truths and, as such, "neoliberalism has become the water in which we swim" (Wilson, 2017, p. 50). Since neoliberalism became the dominant governing ideology in the late 1980s, shifts in policy have drawn social workers away from practice which redefines people as affected by structural injustices towards seeing individuals who have made poor choices as needing to make better choices (Ferguson et al., 2018). This reframing of personal responsibility occurred alongside a change of focus in social work practice from

the community as a source of engagement towards a greater value on engaging one-to-one with individuals (McCarten et al., 2018). This turn to individualised work saw social work dominated by evidence-based clinical approaches that preference dispassionate social workers. Within this paradigm, social workers often ignored economic and social system root causes in favour of seeing families as damaged individuals needing treatment to achieve measurable outcomes (Hyslop, 2017). With the rise in empowerment as a social work practice, the accompanying commitment towards client self-determination helped to sustain the individualism paradigm (Payne, 2014). Of concern, Conneely and Garrett (2015) have suggested that making clients more comfortable in uncomfortable environments has replaced the social justice goals of social work.

Social workers now struggle to maintain empathetic practice as a result of neoliberalism pervading workplaces via “managerialism” (Lavee & Strier, 2018). Managerialism included increases in demand, increased intensity of workloads, the loss of autonomy, as well as significantly more social workers feeling demoralised and reaching burnout (for example, see Hendrix et al., 2021). This influence resulted in social workers experiencing emotional turmoil in the course of their work, leaving social workers feeling like they are battling against their workplace. Consequently, these factors led to social workers losing compassion for their clients; a protective mechanism that saw a rise in increasingly moralistic judgements from emotionally dissonant social workers resulting in the othering of clients (Lavee & Strier, 2018).

Despite working in a neoliberal context, social workers can engage in ethical practice through empowerment practice and social advocacy, guided by social justice principles (Boone et al., 2020; Joseph, 2019). Empowerment practice requires the social workers not to cast blame on individuals if they fail; however, it also

explores the utilisation of principles of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency (Payne, 2014). Of note, O’Brien (2013, 2016) contended that these principles increase the risk of social workers perpetuating neoliberalism’s influence on social work, given neoliberalism also prioritises personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Research has shown that many social workers see the social advocacy dimension of social work as significantly less important than the dominant individual reflexive-therapeutic approach to social work (Houston, 2016). In some cases, social workers have narrowed their social justice focus to the individual level and are seeking more immediate change within the client’s community, rather than larger structural issues (O’Brien, 2010). Further, this localised advocacy involved social workers engaging in normative judgements that favour client narratives and worker morality above rules and legal requirements (Musheno & Maynard-Moody, 2015). Social workers have also managed to resist managerial demands and a structured focus on risk, and they have proven to be resilient in the face of these demands (Ferguson, 2008; Hyslop, 2017).

Here the abundance of literature has demonstrated that neoliberalism has significantly altered the way society thinks of those in need of social support. At the same time, neoliberalism has impacted the management of social work workplaces and the experiences of social workers within their workplaces. Despite these concerns, the literature also offers ways in which social workers can navigate these concerns and engage in advocacy for their clients.

Methodology and methods

This qualitative exploratory study employed purposive sampling for the participant selection via the ANZASW’s Research Participation Invitation system. Purposive sampling involves the researcher naming certain aspects of the population which would be of benefit for the study (Patton,

2015). Here the criteria were community-based social workers with a social work qualification with at least five years of practice experience since 2009 in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research data were collected via semi-structured interviews over Zoom. Eight participants were selected as they responded to the research advertisement and met the inclusion criteria. The participants were based in various locations around Aotearoa New Zealand and had diverse, community-based social work experiences in the child welfare, foster care, sexual behaviour, health, mental health, disability, and family harm sectors.

The interviews comprised a mix of theoretical and experiential questions. The topics covered in the interview included views about poverty, risk/vulnerability labels, the role of political ideologies in social work practice, and what they understood with respect to neoliberalism. Interviews were completed during January and February 2020, were audio recorded using Zoom software; the narratives were transcribed and returned to participants for comment and correction. The researcher thematically analysed the data to generate an understanding of participant experiences and meaning through coding of data, production of themes, and then further refinement of themes from the participant narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Four main themes were developed: (1) participants understand structural injustices and stigma associated with poverty; (2) opportunities for advocacy in compliance-driven workplaces; (3) individual social work dominates participants' practice; and (4) social advocacy in local communities is a preference to address structural issues.

The research is subject to several limitations. The research uses a small sample size to generate themes and there is subjectivity within the participant narratives; however, findings may have a broader application (Trochim et al., 2016). The findings offer proximal similarity when looking at other

experiences of social workers engaging with clients in a neoliberal context in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research contributes to knowledge building about social worker understanding of neoliberalism, the value social workers hold for ideological influences in general, and the capacity and willingness to engage in advocacy for their clients.

Results

The participant interviews generated narratives from a tension-filled working environment impacted by bureaucracy and managerialism. Each of the participants were aware of societal injustices and the link to impoverishment of their clients. The participants witnessed societal stigma about this and could also describe their professional colleagues (and in some cases, themselves) engaging in othering. A surprising finding was that the participants had little understanding of neoliberalism and did not hold any considerable value to understanding ideology as part of their practice. The results also show social workers were practising at an individual level via empowerment practice with some examples of advocacy, but when pressed to think about clients' futures felt solutions needed to come through macro social change. The following themes derived from the participant narratives are presented below.

Awareness of societal injustices

The participant narratives demonstrate their awareness of the need for social advocacy due to structural injustices. Participants unanimously agreed that there was significant societal unfairness in Aotearoa New Zealand and were readily able to discuss the causes of poverty and the impact of living in impoverished homes. Amy recalled her experiences of the overwhelming effects of poverty on the families she worked with, "they've had one shit thing after another shit thing happen to them and they can't find their feet". Participants

regularly talked about the emotional strain of living in an impoverished situation. Ida spoke of “a sense of hopelessness, a sense of discrimination, not being listened to, being judged”, with Elizabeth noting that, “people start to operate from a place of fear rather than a place of security”.

Most participants demonstrated a degree of empathy. Jodie talked about the emotional difficulty she felt in trying to have families reconsider choices which would have compounded their situation. Hinetau spoke from personal experience by reflecting that: “myself and my partner have fulltime work. We both get paid well. However, we haven’t climbed the ladder, so how can people that get nothing step up a step?” Anne and Jodie acknowledged that they had experienced times when they had made poor financial or behavioural choices. Amy also offered insight into how oppression can impact on people:

I can do that [be relentless] on behalf of somebody else ‘cause I have righteous anger behind me, but when it’s for myself and I’m being told “no, you’re not really worth it, nah, that was your own fault anyway”, of course you get dejected, and you give up.

Here the findings show that participants were able to clearly demonstrate their awareness of the structural injustices in society, including the negative consequences of poverty, framed within empathetic responses to the plight of people experiencing poverty.

Societal stigma

The participants were aware of societal stigma towards their clients. Robyn explained that Aotearoa New Zealand had suffered because there is now less tolerance of people and society had become quick to blame less fortunate people. Helena was concerned that society views impoverished families “as not being worthy and they’re

being brushed with this idea that they’re just not trying”. Two of the participants raised the propagation of the othering discourse in the media. Elizabeth saw that “it’s kind of rampant in the media, so there’s that discourse out in our communities that people ought to blame”. Several participants expressed concern about the level of societal apathy. Amy offered the view that, “unless people who are okay, understand, have some kind of concept of the [dysfunction] of the system, they’re not going to be able to see it”. Jodie hoped that people would be more supportive of people in impoverished situations but was concerned this would not eventuate because of the popular view that “everyone in New Zealand is treated equal, we get all the same chances”.

Elizabeth was the only participant who thought that the social work profession had an engrained blaming discourse, “I think people got really categorised and judged a lot ... I certainly saw in practice, social workers judging families who were deemed at risk.” Two other participants also expressed similar views when reflecting opinions that some families ought to be responsible for their circumstances. One participant expressed considerable frustration about a challenging family she had worked with. This participant showed considerable frustration about parents who spent their money drinking for days on end, leaving their children little food or clothing. Furthermore, she expressed annoyance at the parents wanting financial assistance for their children, arguing that the parents’ requests for support should be declined until they stopped their excessive drinking.

The participants noticed the presence of concerning attitudes in other helping professions. Anne spoke of her concerns when, “you have to listen to people [professionals] saying, ‘oh my god, why doesn’t she just do some budgeting’ or whatever it is. It’s like [the cause of poverty are] well beyond that”. Several participants also recalled how professionals limited their efforts for families they saw

as undeserving. Helena noted that within interagency meetings, “they described this family, ‘haven’t really worked hard enough, haven’t tried hard enough to change their situation, and so don’t put any time into that family. Don’t bother meeting with that family’”. Ida recounted, “they haven’t really done anything for the family, other than they make judgements on them. They say, ‘she’s a useless mother, she’s got an alcohol problem’”.

Social worker understanding of ideology and neoliberalism

Half of the participants believed that understanding ideology was necessary as part of their work. Of those, however, Hinetau saw the importance, but immediate concerns overburdened her to pay any attention to ideology in her daily practice. Also, Elizabeth’s position had changed over her career as a response to her experiences, which eventually saw her be mistrustful of government messaging. Therefore, the sense of disenfranchisement expressed by Elizabeth and Hinetau meant that only two of the participants expressed an unambiguous value of understanding ideology. The other half of the participants found little value in understanding ideology. Jodie, for example, thought, “they’re [political ideologies] all pretty much the same if you ask me. I like to think they’re different, but on the ground, I don’t see it”. While all the participants had heard of neoliberalism as a governing ideology, it was surprising that only one of the participants expressed value in understanding political ideologies as part of their work *and* could discuss a working knowledge of neoliberalism.

All the participants expressed views that suggested they knew neoliberalism to be of concern. Helena suggested neoliberalism was a flawed bureaucratic process, “[that is about] finding a way to be accountable for the strange work of the social worker, because we do strange work. It’s very hard to say how much of it is going to go

into helping a family”. When asked about risk and vulnerability labels, four of the participants expressed clear opinions against the usefulness or appropriateness of these terms. Perspectives included a link back to societal blame:

It speaks of the other... We class somebody else who’s not with us, as vulnerable or at risk. It makes us feel better. I’m not a fan of the term. It’s comfortable for some people to think that people who are in poverty are there by their own fault, or their own misdeeds, or their own doings. (Jodie)

In alignment with Jodie, Elizabeth explained, “my concern was that people get labelled and then really stuck with that and blamed for the circumstances they were in”. Two participants accepted that the terms were necessary. Ida noted that, “I don’t like labels per se, but I think there are some very vulnerable families and very at risk families”. Another two participants expressed that, while hearing “at risk” and “vulnerable” as classification terms, they had not considered what that might mean for their practice.

Bureaucracy and managerialism

All the participants believed that the nature of their practice had greater levels of bureaucratic requirements than at the start of their careers. These issues included increased administrative work, a focus on contractual priorities, and increased compliance. Hinetau succinctly reflected her view that, “unfortunately paperwork has taken priority over people, so the [greater] percentage is behind the desk”. She expressed frustration about the increased compliance issues with the contract requirements:

We’re supposed to be getting people to engage, because if people don’t engage, they’re not going to change ... getting them to tick boxes? I’ve never convinced a murderer to give up their murdering ways by getting them to tick boxes.

With the increased bureaucracy some of the participants expressed concern about accountability towards policy compliance. Amy acknowledged that she had performed actions that she did not necessarily believe in, “to protect my own ass”. Hinetau had a similar view, commenting that, “this paper trail of nothing that takes the whole day ... it’s a matter of having to keep myself safe, rather than fighting against it”. In contrast, Ida spoke of occasions where she refused to complete tasks that she did not think were right for her clients, and in one account this resulted in, “a supervisor actually chased me through the corridor saying, ‘you come back here, and you do as you’re told, I’m ordering you to do that!’”. There was also a simple but stark account where one manager openly told the participant that she could not work with a family because “they’re only a drain on it [because they did not fit into contract eligibility]” (Helena).

Half of the participants recalled times when, to achieve a necessary outcome, they had actively breached workplace regulations. Three participants talked about manipulating funding requirements to achieve the desired outcome of better service support. They rationalised this behaviour as “not doing anything so terrible” (Amy), “innovative and taking initiative ... nothing majorly illegal, just seeing a need” (Elizabeth), and “I would never do anything really wildly overt, but I’m a bit subversive at the edges” (Anne). The other participants believed that following the rules was a necessary part of being safe. Helena detailed a process where she would work through challenges with her external supervisor to ensure she kept an ethical position while being able to work in an organisation. Elizabeth provided a warning to social workers about the challenge of being able to advocate for their clients:

... the reality of stepping into a role in the organisation, the purpose of the organisation, the values and policies or organisation, don’t actually call for

working around social justice. They call for treating, treating families ... it’s about fixing them up because there’s something wrong.

It might not be surprising that social workers have experienced increased administrative and compliance requirements in their work; however, it is concerning that they face ethical issues when having to circumvent workplace rules to achieve what they thought was the right social work decision.

Advocacy and empowerment

All the participants were able to recall at least one instance of a supportive manager who encouraged advocacy. Amy talked of “a real culture of advocacy ... it had that sort of slightly renegade ‘two women in a truck and off you go’ ... incredible and it felt compatible with what I believed”. Jodie spoke of a manager who “experiences the same frustrations we do ... she’s going to try and advocate for us, advocating for our families”. Helena recalled a manager who had shared values around working in the community to effect change: “she was unique, and I knew that at the time, and I always thought, ‘take that’, because it’s not going to last forever”. Hinetau reflected that “I have a manager who is amazing. We have a Māori kaupapa, but he actually lives it”.

Participants described individual advocacy as a significant part of their social work. When asked about examples of advocacy, common participant responses focused on personal empowerment of families. Hinetau noticed that in one case, “their self-confidence and self-worth started to grow ... they started taking pride in themselves because they had a purpose”. Other participants commented: “the change needs to come from within. I think by encouraging them and highlighting the strengths that they’ve got ... you support them in that, and you point them in the right direction” (Ida). For Elizabeth it was about “their own kind of self-respect, self-esteem, and what

was possible for them ... so really changing their own view of their circumstance". There were examples of advocacy for the rights of the client against the face of professional othering. Robyn noted that in these professional meetings she was able to, "sit and stay true to this individual, whose voice should be paramount".

When discussing the utility of macro advocacy in their work, all the participants recognised the need to address systemic issues, however all but one struggled to recall examples of macro advocacy. Jodie's articulation of a key principle of social work is representative of the common response by participants, "when you look at the situation, you assess it across the systems lens ... who plays what role in where this person is". It was Amy who reflected on the utility of social work advocacy at the micro and macro levels. For her, making change at an individual level was meaningful but incomplete—however advocacy at the macro level lacked meaning:

I went from being a grassroots activist ... to being at [workplace] where I could see the change that I was making to that one family, one at a time ... With the first one [macro advocacy] I had somewhere for the anger, but I never got a sense of anything changing. With this, I could see a whole lot of change, but I wasn't doing anything about the overall injustice. (Amy)

A vision for the future

Interestingly, there was agreement that, if the uninformed majority of Aotearoa New Zealand could understand poverty, then a more supportive society might appear. Anne and Elizabeth each shared an example of how engaging local communities around poverty has created opportunities for community-based support:

It's been a real eye opener for those teams, they get as much out of it as the

clients... they've often gone back and debriefed with the team leader and talked about how they hadn't realised what it was like for some people. They're always eager to get involved again. (Anne)

I know that people have been sometimes shocked when I've shared things with them. They want to know, people fundamentally, actually want to make a difference for their people. People are in their worlds... people maybe don't want to know, but when they do know, they want to help, they want to have their communities work. (Elizabeth)

The findings revealed that the participants understood that their clients were not at fault for their impoverishment even though society blames them for this. The participants described challenging workplaces within which they practise, but also were proud of successes they achieved with their clients. Most participants wanted devolution of decision-making to communities where clients could have hope instilled and to gain self-reliance.

There are opportunities which arose from the participants' narratives. Their accounts of working with impoverished situations showed that social workers understand the structural causes of poverty, the loss of opportunities, and the lack of hope that can exist in those homes. Within these accounts, the participants were able to show empathy about the devastating consequences of poverty and the emotional strain families endure. In part, despite the othering seen in the participants' own narratives, this understanding includes the experiences of othering engaged by other helping professions and society. This insight offers a small step towards social action via their capacity and opportunity to challenge this othering by their social service sector colleagues. These issues are deeply socialised, however, social workers can push back on othering practices by challenging these interactions on a case-by-case basis. This action is happening, as Elizabeth

noted advocating “to shift people’s, other professionals’, thinking around that family”. Being critical of social norms and practices in the interagency meetings is where social work advocacy can make immediate change.

The findings show that social workers have a good understanding of structural injustices but are not engaging ideological perspectives to further analyse what these injustices means for their practice. The participants demonstrated an awareness of an ingrained blaming culture within society and their colleagues, however at times they engaged in this behaviour themselves. Within this context, social workers are finding ways to engage in individual-level advocacy for their clients. The following section discusses how these findings impact on the ability of social workers to provide support and advocacy to disadvantaged families.

Discussion

Neoliberalisation of social work practice

Research has shown that neoliberal managerial practices prioritise obtaining measurable outcomes to achieve centrally set targets in the most cost-effective way possible (Döbl & Ross, 2013; Sawyers, 2016). Supporting available literature (for example, Morley, 2022), the results of the study show that social work is increasingly compliance driven, compelling the prioritisation of collecting data requirements and a loss of control of local priorities. All the participants recognised that management and contract requirements had negatively affected their ability to advocate for their clients. Helena’s explanation of ticking boxes at the expense of engagement, or Anne noting the constant presence of needing to promote government-funded programmes to ensure continued funding of services, are real frustrations arising from compliance-driven practice. More than anything else, the participants’ experiences reinforced other research (Ferguson, 2008; Hyslop, 2017) which points

to increasing opposition and dissatisfaction with the increased compliance and its effect on social work advocacy. While social workers are experiencing these frustrations in their daily work, the participants showed a limited understanding of how or why neoliberalism is affecting their experiences and the nature of their work.

An unanticipated finding was that only half of the participants saw utility in understanding the ideology of the government of the day. There is no readily available local research about social worker understanding of neoliberalism or political ideology in general—as opposed to research about social workers’ political views (for example, Duarte, 2017). Some participants had difficulty in describing what the characteristics and impacts of neoliberalism might look like. Only one participant valued understanding ideology as a tool for social change. This is a critical issue, as social worker indifference—or lack of value assigned to understanding neoliberalism—reinforces dominant social structures (Galbin, 2014). The inability of social workers to understand neoliberalism raises serious ethical and competence issues. With most of the participants unable to articulate the basic tenets of neoliberalism (and only half stated a view which valued the importance in understanding ideology as part of their work), there is also the concern that social workers are at risk of failing to fulfil their code of ethics by not publicly challenging and working against neoliberalism (for example, Russell, 2017; Spolander et al., 2016). Most participants had a sense that neoliberalism and labels were contrary to social work values but struggled to think beyond or outside hegemonic discourse as demanded in the literature (for example, Fenton, 2018; Gair, 2018). Demonstrating some concern about neoliberalism, half of the participants believed that the use of at risk and vulnerable labels were inappropriate and as a contributor to the othering discourse.

Of consequence, this research found that some social workers occasionally engaged in othering of clients. The literature notes that an increasing number of social workers engage in othering behaviour, with new social workers struggling to have critical views of neoliberalism (Brockmann & Garrett, 2022). This research supports that finding with two of the participants' narratives showed signs of othering discourses. Further, Elizabeth saw othering discourses from social workers while speaking of seeing social workers assign a risk discourse on families due to being in impoverished homes, rather than any action or omission causing harm. In addition to social workers, participants had observed widespread othering of clients from professional colleagues. This supports the literature which indicates that distress and othering behaviour by social workers mirrors other helping professions, including midwives, teachers, and nurses (for example, McCabe, 2016; Nilsen et al., 2017; Roberts & Schiavenato, 2017).

As a starting point, social workers need to critically reflect on why the neoliberal labels hold so much power in their everyday work. Such a position empowers social workers to challenge othering discourses in society (and within the helping professions) and to begin systemic change (Joseph, 2019; McCarten et al., 2018). Recognising that half of the participants did not name neoliberal labels as priorities, there is an opportunity to increase levels of critical reflection so that social workers can heed this call. This may need to start at the beginning of a social worker's career, with Beddoe and Keddell (2016) arguing for the deconstruction of social work students' belief systems because of them growing up in a neoliberal environment. As a foundation, social workers must be able to clearly articulate what neoliberalism is if social workers are to resist the challenges to social work and to advocate for their clients (Morley et al., 2019). The increased use of informed supervisory practice would be of significant

value; however, supervisors must have conceptual interpretive reasoning of the wider socio-political environment (including dominant discourses and oppressive structures) as part of a set of competent supervision skills. This contributes an understanding of theories, frameworks, and principles which make sense of the social worker's experiences (Rankine, 2021).

Social worker advocacy and a neoliberal blindness paradox

Despite the prevalence of neoliberal discourse, social workers are wanting to meet the needs of clients. However, they are working at an individual level in a way which reinforces neoliberal messaging of self-responsibility and personal initiative (see Brockmann & Garrett, 2022). Here, then, is a *neoliberal blindness paradox* where the research observed social workers' reported frustrations about social structures shaped by neoliberalism affecting work, but then expected their clients to have hope, personal initiative, and to be more resilient when encountering structural injustice.

This micro-level advocacy was based around personal empowerment and giving people a sense of hope. Participant accounts were abundant with neoliberal messages about change needing to come from within, pointing people in the right direction, and finding their own means to change their situation. This research supports McCarten et al. (2018) and O'Brien's (2010) argument that the personal responsibility agenda which neoliberalism promotes has influenced the pursuit of social justice to shift from a macro to a micro focus. Further, there are concerns about the trend towards individualisation, with the construction of social work practice now based on what the individual client believes the problem to be (Houston, 2016). The concern here is that Lukes' (2005) argument that the powerful can control people to believe in something

even if it is against their best interests, also exists in people living in impoverished situations. With the shift in societal attitudes to centre on self-responsibility, freedom, and personal initiative, clients are now using neoliberal messages to present themselves as worthy, but in doing so neglect their own needs (Lavee, 2022; Woolford & Nelund, 2013). As such, social workers need to be aware that clients might often express or act in ways based on the pervasive normalisation of those self-evident goods of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency.

When enabled by their workplace, there were accounts where the social service and the social worker had the opportunities to advocate at the micro level. There were also instances where the manager would advocate for the social workers to expand the scope of their advocacy. The participant narratives mirrored the literature which regarded a supportive manager as one whom understands social structures and the need for relational engagement, rather than simply providing a service (Payne, 2009). All participants had experienced a supportive manager and described this as being someone that shared the same social justice outlook as themselves. Within this environment, the participants talked of a sense of enjoyment and freedom to collaborate in advocacy for their families. Studies have noted that compliance-based management in community and statutory settings have negatively affected social worker wellbeing (for example, Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2012; Lavee & Strier, 2018). Lavee and Strier (2018) noted that institutional abuse (increasingly high caseloads with limited means, guidance, or emotional support from their workplaces) was a significant factor which limits social workers' ability to have empathetic practice. Indeed, they found that the participants' daily struggle within their own workplaces was of more significance than difficulties arising from engagements with their clients.

In this study, there were accounts of negative experiences of poor management, consistent with the literature (for example, Hendrix et al., 2021). Several participants were satisfied they met their ethical requirements by raising issues and then moving on to other demands. Others spoke about the frustration about carrying out activities to protect themselves against bureaucratic consequences which did not fit comfortably with them. Hinetau recalled her frustration in completing a "paper trail of nothing" that she saw as pointless but did so to avoid any employment issues. Amy, too, spoke of having to do things she saw little value in, but did if only "to protect my own ass". The participants' limited discretion seems bound by what Musheno and Maynard-Moody (2015) described as social workers' feeling of duty to comply with their service regulations. However, social workers have agency to decide how to implement their workplace practice requirements (Lipsky, 2010; Mitendorf & Ewijk, 2019). Indeed, the social work literature notes that social workers have started constructing subversive strategies to meet clients' needs, and the participants' accounts reflect the claim that this advocacy is very much present at the micro level (Schietecat et al., 2018).

In reviewing the literature there was discussion about the need for social workers to inform society about othering, the impact of poverty, and other social injustices (Joseph, 2019; McCarten et al., 2018). While there was a clear preference for individual empowerment, when pressed, most participants expressed a need to consider the community within which individuals live. The common view amongst the participants was that the solutions to social injustice were at community level by reorganising systems or utilising the inherent goodwill in local communities. Participants believed more supportive communities would appear as social workers invigorated dormant goodwill. Anne and Elizabeth's experiences about engaging with local business to support

impoverished homes are excellent examples of what can happen. Munford and Sanders (2020) described these opportunities as the challenging of dominant discourses which exist in local communities (though the authors do caution that challenging narratives must first require social workers to engage in critical analysis of social norms, contexts, and conditions).

Conclusion

The research results suggest that social workers are in positions where they are sustaining neoliberalism in their practice and their communities. Social workers are aware of the effects of neoliberalism in society and within their profession (and other professions); however, social workers do not have a working knowledge of neoliberalism, and therefore may struggle to challenge these issues. It is critical that social workers understand what neoliberalism is, and the consequences, if social advocacy is to work. The increasingly individual empowerment practice by social workers, without social advocacy, is also introducing risks that social workers are reinforcing neoliberal messaging around worthiness, self-responsibility, resilience, and personal initiative. There is substantial literature about the impact of neoliberalism on social work practice, however the lack of literature about social workers' knowledge of neoliberalism suggests a fundamental assumption that social workers have a critical understanding of neoliberalism. Indeed, the neoliberal blindness paradox identified within the participants' narratives implies that this is not necessarily the case.

There is good news, however. The dominance of micro-advocacy does not necessarily mean the consolidation of neoliberalism. This research found social workers have the agency and willingness to work within their community for social justice. Importantly, their accounts reveal that communities are willing to pursue social justice outcomes when given these opportunities.

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