Impacts of Neoliberalism on Social Work Practice and Careers:
A Context and Agenda for Inquiry

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In this presentation I will describe a research project in the making that has implications for work-life balance, which is the unifying theme of the session. I will be brief, in hopes of allowing for discussion which is too often missing in conferences. My central questions are *how has the turn toward neo-liberal social policy affected the daily practice of clinical social workers (including ethical conduct that is rooted in their professional mission)? And, also, how has the shift from public employment, once bolstered by public employee union protections and greater professional legitimacy at various levels of government, affected and undermined the career stability and work/life balance of those in this embattled occupation?*

My claim in the presentation is that what is sorely lacking and needed are detailed, *critical narratives* of daily practice, which can document both the objective and subjective injuries to professional conduct and, also, provide insight into strategies of resistance and advocacy that would enhance both individual and collective leverage for those in front-line practice. Such a project—using ethnographic methods to reconcile more abstract ethical rules and values with the vagaries of daily practice—has been undertaken by others, such as in Brodwin's (2013) book, *Everyday Ethics,* centering on community psychiatry.

Below, I sketch the development of my interest in this topic and identify useful but limited lenses through which such narratives can be viewed, including debates about *professionalization*; mechanisms embedded in neoliberal governance (such as *evidence-based practice* and *New Public Management,* the term in usage in the UK and elsewhere; and *institutional ethnography*. Finally, I'll argue that the use of *narrative analysis* as flourished in the discussion of case-work and client rapport (Riessman & Quinney), it has yet to be turned back on the work-a-day stresses of social workers themselves (but see Thaden and Robinson [2010]).

This agenda has grown out of preliminary reading and, also, teaching relationships with a great many students which have led me to a frustrating conclusion: although there is an extensive literature on neoliberalism, and sources linking this paradigm to stresses in human services and related policy (e.g., Spolander, et al 2014; Stark 2010), there has been scant attention to how this shift has affected the daily *practice* of front-line providers; consequently, there are few accounts of resistance and advocacy, among social workers, in the face of funding and policy changes that pose a frontal assault on the goals, client relationships and efficacy of social work.

My approach to these problems is rooted in a career-long commitment to the ethnographic study of work and careers, often associated with the Chicago School, especially the influence of Everett Hughes and others who (during the 1950s and '60s) undertook detailed case-studies of occupational practice, organizations and careers. A claim that underlies my comments is that understanding work/life balance requires attention not only to formal, macro or meso-level policies but, also, more textured

understanding of the nature and division of labor in particular occupations and settings (e.g., Hughes, 1958).

Although such accounts of occupational practice are too rare generally—given the labor-intensive nature of sustained fieldwork—social work poses special challenges, inasmuch as it is, as Pithouse (1987) argues, an "invisible trade" by virtue of the sensitive, confidential, and hidden nature of direct casework. This "hidden" quality of direct practice compounds what has historically been a lack of critical *occupational scrutiny* within the scholarship of social work, oriented as it is to the nature and diversity of clients' needs.

My interest in the topic is also rooted in personal experience: my mother earned a MSW in her early 40s, and worked for some 15 years as a juvenile probation officer for a large Midwestern city. As a county employee, she was represented by AFSCME (*American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees*) and this ensured both job security and, also, generous healthcare and retirement benefits. These benefits were offset, however, by a steady erosion in the role and impact of social workers as advocates for youthful offenders, as her career unfolded. A strong, progressive ethos of rehabilitation and community development obtained during her graduate training (the aftermath of *Great Society* policies of the mid-1960s), which gave way to a far more punitive approach in the 1980s and '90s, along with privatization of services and the erosion of pay incentives tied to credentials and continuing education. During this period, as well, the role and influence of social workers in the courtroom and upon judges' discretion was much reduced, which left many feeling that they were passive accomplices in an unjust system. I note this mixed experience in order to argue that, in examining work/life balance, it's important to consider issues of occupational ethos and mission, as factors that shape both objective and

subjective stress and "burnout," perhaps especially in human services jobs that are tied to intense emotional labor.

As an occupation that has traditionally been and remains dominated by women, social work is a relevant site for exploring "family friendly" policies. According to a (2017) *Profile of the Social Work Workforce* from George Washington University, there are some 650,000 social workers employed in the U.S., though this estimate is muddled because of a lack of clarity regarding job titles, responsibilities, and licensure (fewer than half of that number hold state licensure as social workers). There is also fluidity regarding the required credentials required for employment, with increasing pressure on workers to earn MSW (Master of Social Work) degrees, especially for those who seek supervisory roles with higher salaries. Over the past decade, there has been a 50 % increase in both Bachelor's and Master's degrees awarded, indicating strong growth in demand for social work services.

According to the same (2017) profile, 88 % of those earning BSW are female, whereas the highest proportion of men (20%) is found among employees with non-social work Bachelor's degrees. The proportion of males is somewhat higher among those late in their careers (20% for those age 60-64), but differences are marginal. Social work continues to be largely sex-typed—a "semi-profession," along with school teaching, nursing, and library work, which was studied as such in a stream of studies that sought to compare/contrast social work with other, longer-established professions such as law and medicine (e.g., Toren 1972).

One vivid index of professional unease in social work is turnover, which is especially high among those employed in the public sector (in one study I read, it ranges from 20-30

percent per year. This is consequential both for social worker and, also, for their clients.

According to an online article in *Governing* from 2016:

> One well-known study found that with one caseworker, the chance for a child to achieve a permanent and stable living situation was 74 percent. If a child had two caseworkers in one year, the odds dropped to 17 percent. With three caseworkers, it was a mere 5 percent.
>
> "Turnover is devastating," said Scott McCowan, a former judge and now director of the Children's Rights Center at the University of Texas Law School. "If you're a caseworker, you develop a relationship with the parent and child. That's what helps you help them. But every time there's turnover, you start from scratch."

"Neoliberalism" carries varied meanings, in terms of scope and degree of

abstraction, but Harvey (2010:2) defines it as:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

In social work, this impulse has—certainly from the 1980s and the "New

Federalism" of the Reagan administration—led to both absolute reductions in funding for

human services and, also, to the "devolution" of funding and responsibility from the federal

to state and local levels. Since states are less able to engage in deficit spending, this shift

has decimated the provision of human services and, also, many states have weakened the

ability of public employee unions to engage in collective bargaining, which compounds the

lack of leverage for those in such occupations.

These forces partly explain why, according a noted (1994) critique by Specht and

Courtney, in the book *Unfaithful Angels,* there has been a notable shift in the profession,

from public/community service and advocacy, to more individualistic, psychotherapeutic

approaches and roles in private practice. Indeed, this argument is borne out with recent

data: only 40 percent of employed social workers in 2015 were employed by any unit or level of government, with 60 percent in private for profit or non-profit agencies, or self-employed (2017 *Profile).* These forces have all contributed to the occupational challenges and stress in social work. However, analyses at this level fail to portray the *nuanced, practical dilemmas of workers, or strategies of resistance that such awareness might reveal.*

What are traditional or more recent lines of critique, in sociology, which could inform a critical, narrative-interview based project such as I'm calling for? I have time only to touch on a few promising possibilities that have been present in related literatures: *professionalization; neoliberal governance; and institutional ethnography*.

In earlier decades, it was thought that models of the professions could inform strategies by which occupational fields could consolidate control over their conditions of and governance over their work. Key features of this model included having a distinctive and well-developed body of knowledge; extended formal training; technical/clinical expertise; a strong ethic of client service; responsibility for fateful human problems; and the presence of a code of ethics, sanctioned by professional associations. This "trait" model of professionalization was ultimately displaced by a "conflict" model, which claimed that the degree of professional control and autonomy in a given field is the product of political/power relationships, rather than of intrinsic qualities of occupations (see Pavalko, 1988:17-50). It would seem that social work, by these criteria, qualifies as a profession. Yet, members have historically suffered from unstable funding, intrusions into professional judgement and conduct, and limited leverage in terms of compensation and benefits, especially in the public sector. Thus, *one line of inquiry would explore why social workers have been denied these benefits, which other occupations have managed to secure.*

A second basis of inquiry would focus on mechanisms through which broad, neo-liberal agendas are implemented in everyday practice and *governance* of work, whether formal or informal. In the UK, Australia and elsewhere, there has been a concerted shift toward *new public management,* an approach to governance that promises to create more "business-like" efficiency and accountability (Diefenbach, 2009). This model has sought to replace job security and seniority rights with various "merit-based" incentives; to induce discipline in line with an ideology of market-competition; and clear "outcome measures" in line with a rational cost/benefit analysis. Clearly, given the complex and multiple factors involved in social work outcomes, such an approach exists uneasily with the practical conduct of work. Similarly, the stress on *evidence-based practice (EBP)* in human services is problematic; whereas there are often clear clinical "trials" and data-sources in clinical medicine (where EBP first took hold), and a strong culture of quantification, the nature and range of variables in social casework is difficult to square with this approach (Wellin,2013). Despite the dramatic expansion of EBP across the human services, there is scant narrative, experiential data on whether/how practitioners regard this as helpful, or harmful, and why.

A final and promising point of departure for narrative inquiry into the impact of neoliberalism in social work practice is the approach of *institutional ethnography* or IE (e.g., DeVault, 1988). As DeVault argues, drawing on the work of Dorothy Smith, this approach is informed by a Marxian stress on historical materialism, and sustained attention to "documentary reality"—to *texts* which govern work and create cognitive and administrative categories through which workers and their clients come to see reality. These categories, presumably tools for documenting and accounting for labor, often come to dominate the reality of work. Texts, from this perspective, are the means by which work

in specific locales is organized, perceived, and governed by remote political or administrative centers. As such, the focus of ethnographic attention is altered, from the physical work setting, to its embeddedness in a more remote and extensive set of "ruling relations." Governance via texts and regulations also diffuses resistance and conflict over authority, by replacing proximate forms of supervision with seemingly impersonal and "rational" rules and procedures (see Diamond [1992], for an application of IE to the work of aides in nursing homes). Institutional ethnography, then, offers a theoretical and methodological map for uncovering the processes and interactions through which neoliberalism is implemented in human service and other settings.

In conclusion, I have argued that understanding and advocating for enhanced "work/life balance" is partly advanced by attention to formal policy and collective action. That said, in many fields (including social work) historical or traditional forms of collective leverage are weak or absent, and we need to look closely at the experience of work—in particular at ways in which core occupational goals, values, and forms of discretion are under siege. Processes such as I've described promise to shed light on the temporal, psychological, and moral dimensions of work experience, which often shape both the objective and subjective experience of work/life balance in contemporary employment relations.

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