SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' WORKING CONDITIONS: A SURVEY OF MINNESOTAN LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS
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FACT SHEET #5: Neoliberal Managerialism among School Social Workers

BACKGROUND: School Social Work and Neoliberalism

School social workers (SSWs) provide social work services to school-aged children linking the school, home and community. Their work runs the gamut of social work practice from the individual to the community and wellbeing promotion to crisis intervention. Not only do SSWs balance a traditional caseload and foster a constructive academic environment,[1] they work with multiple disciplines, addressing the needs of students and demands of bureaucratic systems.[2] Reports show that SSWs are overworked today and conditions have worsened.[3]

Neoliberal governing logic applies market logic and business principles to social and political arenas, including social welfare administration and management.

Beginning in the 1980s, neoliberal policies instilled market conditions into public welfare requiring business-like managerialism in social services. These changes have led to reduced funding for social service programs (despite growing need), standardization of practice, greater competition for state-funded service contracts, and pressure for providers to prioritize the objectives of funders over organizational missions. Such policies have altered the nature of social services, especially the centrality of human relationships and discernment in practice.

Professional discretion is a professional's ability to employ their knowledge, skills, and code of ethics.[4] Such range in practice is essential for SSWs who address varied needs of diverse students, schools, and communities, and also navigate myriad systems.[5,6,7] Given their broad mandate, it may be that SSWs are afforded a fair amount of professional discretion, despite neoliberal policy.

To assess the relationship between neoliberal managerialism and professional discretion, this fact sheet will share findings from a statewide survey of over 300 SSWs. Neoliberal managerialism was measured through questions assessing pressures of productivity and efficiency, monitoring, standardization, and incentives and sanctions. Professional discretion was assessed based on SSWs' ability to incorporate knowledge, skills and professional ethics in practice.

We asked:

> 1. **To what extent do SSWs experience these pressures of managerialism: productivity and efficiency, monitoring, incentives and sanctions, and practice standardization?**
>
> 2. **To what extent do SSWs experience professional discretion in their work?**

This fifth fact sheet presents findings on the effects of neoliberal managerialism on the working conditions of SSWs in Minnesota and is part of a larger project: *Impacts of Neoliberalism on MN Social Workers Project,* chaired by Dr. Jessica Toft of the University of Minnesota School of Social Work.

THE SAMPLE

394* direct-line school social workers licensed in Minnesota:

Education
- 17% Bachelors
- 82% Masters
- 1% Doctoral

Geography
- 23% Rural
- 10% Suburban
- 67% Urban

Gender
- 92% Female
- 7% Male
- 1% Non-Binary

Race
- 93% White
- 1.5% Asian
- 1.5% Black
- 1% LatinX
- 1% Indigenous American
- 2% Multiracial

Age and Experience

Age
- Mean = 44 years
- Range = 23-70 years

Experience
- Mean = 17 years
- Range = 1-46 years

Income
- 4% [0 - 40,000]
- 30% [40,001 - 60,000]
- 44% [60,001 - 80,000]
- 21% [80,001 - 100,000]
- 1% [100,001+]

*Not all SSWs responded to all questions

PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY

The majority of SSWs experienced pressure to get more done in less time and take on more clients. A quarter or more found problematic the pressure to place efficiency over quality and prioritize paperwork over practice. They were much less pressured to close cases quickly, select clients based on likely positive outcomes, and drop clients who did not perform well.

Table 1: Management Pressures of Productivity and Efficiency

In my agency, to what extent does management pressure social workers to…	Not Problematic	Problematic
Get more done in same amount of time	42%	58%
Take on more clients	36%	64%
Close cases quickly	93%	7%
Select clients based on likely positive outcomes	96%	4%
Drop clients who do not perform well	97%	3%
Evaluated performance based on efficiency over quality	75%	25%
Prioritize paperwork over practice	71%	29%

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"
  Problematic = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent," and "To a very great extent."

MONITORING

Over a quarter of SSWs experienced problematic degrees of management monitoring their computer usage. One-fifth also reported problematic monitoring of their workplace email. A fair number found the monitoring of activity via video-cameras problematic.

Table 2: Management's Use of Monitoring

To what extent does management…	Not Problematic	Problematic
Monitor employees' telephone callst	97%	3%
Use video-cameras to monitor employees' activities on the job	89%	11%
Monitor employees' computer usage	74%	26%
Monitor employees' email	80%	20%
Track the location of employees using technology	91%	9%

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"
  Problematic = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent," and "To a very great extent."

INCENTIVES AND SANCTIONS

Half of SSWs experienced increased degrees of oversight if their performance goals aren't met. Only 6% of SSWs experienced problematic degrees of management promoting competition among co-workers.

Table 3: Management's Use of Incentives and Sanctions

To what extent does management…	Not Problematic	Problematic
Pay less if performance goals aren't met	93%	7%
Increase oversight if performance goals aren't met	50%	50%
Pay more if performance goals are exceeded	88%	12%
Promote competition among co-workers	94%	6%

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"
  Problematic = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent," and "To a very great extent."

PRACTICE STANDARDIZATION

The majority of SSWs reported as problematic the ability to allow client input into treatment goals. SSWs also experienced management exerting problematic degrees of control on the requirement of evidence-based interventions and setting of practices or interventions. More than half found problematic how much management determines practice type and a sizeable portion the degree to which they determine treatment goals.

BURNOUT & LEAVE POSITION

SSWs shared their degree of burnout and their likelihood to leave their position:

- 43% stated they experienced some symptoms of burnout to complete burnout.

- 21% were considering leaving their position within the next year.

Table 4: Management's Standardization of Practice

In my agency, to what degree does management…	Not Problematic	Problematic
Sets practice treatment goals for clients	60%	40%)
Allows client's input for treatment goals	24%	76%
Determines the set of practices or interventions allowed with clients	45%	55%
Determines the length of time allowed per client meeting	71%	29%
Requires evidence-based practice interventions	31%	69%
Emphasizes my performance outcomes rather than my practice	65%	35%)
Sets the total number of sessions or length of relationship with clients	85%	15%

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"
  Problematic = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent," and "To a very great extent."
  – excluding "Allows client's input for treatment goals", this is coded as the inverse.

Overall, SSWs especially experienced managerialism in pressures to increase productivity and efficiency and to standardize practice.

INDICATORS OF PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION

Table 5: Professional Discretion

In your workplace, to what extent are you able to…	Not Problematic	Problematic
Practice your professional values as a social worker	64%	36%
Incorporate the ecological framework in assessment	26%	74%
Build trusting relationships with people you serve	78%	22%
Tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs	59%	41%
Engage with other agencies in supporting your clients	38%	62%
Address clients' issues at the macro level	9%	91%
Shape practice on social, economic, and political history	20%	80%

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"
  Problematic = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent."

Overall, SSWs experienced many limitations to professional discretion. They reported limits to the use of their knowledge related to the ecological model, macro practice, and shaping practice based on social, economic, and political histories of their student groups. They also experienced limits to every day practice: limited ability to engage agencies to support their clients and even tailor interventions to meet students' unique needs. More than a third found problematic their ability to practice in accord with their professional values.

CONCLUSION

ASSESSING SSWs Working Conditions under Neoliberal Managerialism

The survey's findings highlight several indicators of managerialism and professional discretion that are faring well or are problematic. The following "Report Cards" summarize how well SSWs are faring.

REPORT CARD
Productivity & Efficiency — **C** AVERAGE

Item	Grade
Close cases quickly	**A**
Select clients based on likely positive outcomes	**A**
Drop clients who do not perform well	**A**
Evaluate performance based on efficiency over quality of practice	**C**
Prioritize paperwork over practice	**C**
Get more done in the same amount of time	**F**
Take on more clients	**F**

REPORT CARD
Monitoring — **B** AVERAGE

Item	Grade
Monitor employees' telephone calls	**A**
Track the location of employees using technology	**A**
Use video-cameras to monitor employees' actiities on the job	**B**
Monitor employees' email	**B**
Monitor employees'computer usage	**C**

REPORT CARD
Practice Standardization — **D** AVERAGE

Item	Grade
Sets the total of client sessions or length of relationship	**B**
Determines the length of time allowed per client meeting	**C**
Emphasizes my performance outcomes rather than my practice	**D**
Sets practice treatment goals for clients	**D**
Determines the set of practices or interventions allowed	**F**
Requires evidence-based practice interventions	**F**
Requires evidence-based practice interventions	**F**

REPORT CARD
Professional Discretion — **F** AVERAGE

Item	Grade
Build trusting relationships with people you serve	**B**
Practice your professional values as a social worker	**D**
Tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs	**F**
Engage with other agencies in supporting your clients	**F**
Address clients' issues at the macro level	**F**
Shape practice on social, economic, and political history	**F**
Incorporate the ecological framework in assessment	**F**

As the Report Card shows, SSWs experienced managerialist pressures to increase productivity and efficiency and to standardize practice. Most significantly were findings about professional discretion. SSWs reported limits to their use of their knowledge related to the ecological model, macro practice, and shaping practice based on social, economic, and political histories of student groups. They were limited in their ability to engage agencies to support their clients and even tailor interventions to meet students' unique needs. More than a third found problematic their ability to practice according to their professional ethics. Given their broad practice mandate from prevention to crisis intervention and micro to macro systems, the findings reveal that school social work under neoliberal governance constrains professional discretion significantly.

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