Precarious Professionals:
The Impact of Neoliberalism on the Workforce of the Nonprofit Human Service Sector[*]

A Commentary

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The U.S. human service sector encompasses a vast array of private and public agencies that provide "cradle to grave" services in the areas of health, mental health, education, and social welfare. As apparent from support efforts during the COVID pandemic, human service staff are "essential" workers providing critical care and support to the most vulnerable populations. Yet over the past 40 years, neoliberal policies and regulations that emphasize private market solutions, austerity measures, and public sector devolution (Brown, 2015, 2019; Kotsko, 2018) have negatively impacted human services (Abramovitz, 2014; Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Caplan & Ricciardelli, 2016; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Zullo, 2008). Simultaneously, economic precarity among working class, low-income, and in-poverty populations has intensified, resulting in increased demands for human service sector assistance with human service staff reporting that client needs have become more psychologically, socially, and materially complex (Burghardt, 2021; Newell, 2020; Strier, 2019; Zelnick & Abramovitz, 2020). These developments further weaken an already strained human service sector with the COVID pandemic making the situation worse (Alessi, Hutchison, & Kahn, 2021; Neely-Barnes et al, 2021; Ross, et al, 2022).

In this commentary, I focus on the impact of neoliberalism on the U.S. human service sector. Specifically, I highlight some of the strategies used by nonprofit human service agencies in responding to and mitigating neoliberal policies. Given sector and agency contexts, I then focus on the consequences for professional human service agency staff that are largely overlooked in current scholarship.

Neoliberalism, the Nonprofit Sector and Human Service Organizations

Neoliberalism "has never been only about the economics. Neoliberalism is a set of cultural beliefs that celebrates and reifies individualism, property ownership, and wealth accumulation in ways that are profoundly anti-political and anti-democratic" (Wong, 2022). The fiscal consequences of 40 years of neoliberalism, including concentrating wealth in the upper 1%, a widening income gap, de-funding of

government programs and initiatives, increasing personal and household debt (especially student debt), and financial precarity resulting in rising housing and food insecurities, are well documented (Brown, 2015; 2019; Caplan & Ricciardelli, 2016; Gerstle, 2022; Kotsko, 2018; Wong, 2022). Equally important was an accompanying shift in values, initially (and perhaps best) captured in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* when Gorden Gecko asserted: "greed… is good. Greed is right. Greed works" (https://www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/moviespeechwallstreet.html). This reification of the individual, as in "every person for themselves," has atomized society and delegitimated collective action.

In theory, neoliberalism is diametrically opposed to the mission-driven nature of the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits, by definition, are meant to serve and be accountable to community. The shift away from public services and towards market-based solutions, impacted the nonprofit sector, which was expected to respond in some form to providing what society needed. Many nonprofits have done so by embracing more entrepreneurial approaches, including engaging in heightened competition, in order to secure needed resources and provide desired programs and services. As such, there is a considerable body of literature on the integration of business-oriented ethics, values, and practices into the nonprofit world, especially the management of fiscal health and staff control (for examples, see Faulk, et al, 2017; Harrison & Thornton, 2022; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Paarlberg & Hwang, 2017).

A critique has emerged that reframes the sector as a non-profit industrial complex in which neoliberalism is upheld not challenged, especially by thwarting social justice initiatives (Alexander & Fernandez, 2021; Fancher, 2020; Fox & Turner, 2016; Rodríguez, 2007; Samimi, 2010; Samimi & DeHerrera, 2021). Essentially, the nonprofit sector serves the interests of political and economic elites by placating and surveilling marginalized and potentially disruptive populations. The philanthropic arm supports initiatives that maintain this status quo, while underfunding projects or programs that call for structural change. In their comprehensive review and critique of the nonprofit sector, Alexander and Fernandez (2021) argue that the turn toward marketization, the promotion of professionalization, and the regulatory environment in which nonprofits operate have resulted in 40 years of undermining civil society and thus, democracy. The advocacy and public interest functions of nonprofits, necessary in a democracy, have been substantially thwarted.

Human service agencies, by design, are about meeting the needs of the public, especially those from marginalized groups. Yet the human services have been caught in the fiscal web and cultural ethos of neoliberalism. Perhaps to stay viable, the sector and the agencies within it, have adopted various approaches to fiscal management, service goals and delivery, and staffing that reflect neoliberalism (Abramovitz, 2014). For example, clients interventions increasingly are valued for efficiency of implementation, measurable (usually quantifiable) outcomes, and marketability, rather than the more time-consuming approaches of relationship building, or community and structural collective actions.

Research on neoliberalism's impact on the human service sector and agencies paints a dismal picture, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, note that clients and communities, who are asking for assistance from human service agencies, have been affected by neoliberal policies that have heightened various forms of economic precarity including food scarcity, housing insecurity, and employment irregularity. There has been a noticeable uptick in the range of problems and challenges reported by agency service users, most of whom do not have the financial resources to make ends meet. The 2008 Great Recession, for example, devasted individuals, families, and communities already on the margins. Specifically, the housing market collapse, a primary driver of the recession, resulted in an unprecedented number of foreclosures. The ripple effect in terms of homes and jobs lost remains with many today. While corporate elites were largely protected, the "average" person had to fend for themselves.

Figure 1 here

Such circumstances lead directly to requests for human service assistance. They also exacerbate existing or create new physical and mental health illness and distress (e.g., stress and anxiety); for example, the impact of living in or near poverty on the health and well-being of children, adolescents, and adults has been well documented (e.g., Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017; Lee, et. al., 2021; Victora, et. al., 2022). Further, the complexity of service user situations has intensified (Burghardt, 2021; Newell, 2020; Strier, 2019; Zelnick & Abramovitz, 2020). A family seeking housing assistance also may benefit from substance abuse or mental health counseling for a family member, job training opportunities for the adults, and affordable care for children and the elderly. Human service agencies contend with not just an increase in, but an intensification of, client and community demands.

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Neoliberalism's austerity measures, devolution of public services, and emphasis on market solutions has made it much more difficult for human services to respond effectively to growing client and community need. Fiscally starved and unable to meet demand, the human service sector is nonetheless blamed by politicians and the public for a failure to adequately serve those in need (Burghardt, 2021). Human services are thus delegitimated and degraded. The sector's response to neoliberal austerity measures has manifested primarily through the adoption of service privatization and managerialism, thereby placing an increased burden on nonprofits that are being managed in more restrictive or authoritarian ways (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2015; Zelnick & Abramovitz, 2020).

Human Service Organizations and the Professional Staff

Human service organizations engage in various strategies to counter neoliberalism impact. Staff are asked to increase client contact hours (necessary for billing revenue), undertake tasks such as endless paperwork on their own time, and pay for their own professional development opportunities and supervision (Burghardt, 2021; Huerta et al, 2021; Font, 2012; Katz, Julien-Chinn & Wall, 2021; Park & Pierce, 2020; Spielfogel, Leathers, & Christian, 2016; Trujillo, 2020; Vito, 2020). Human service managers raise service eligibility thresholds, restrict number of client sessions, and focus on insurance reimbursement as opposed to client need (Aronowitz, 2012; Burghardt, 2021; Caplan & Ricciardelli, 2016; Collins-Camargo et al, 2019; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Zelnick, Abramovitz, & Pirutinsky, 2022). Managers also look for ways to cut personnel costs through below market staff compensation and precarious work arrangements. Given these conditions, a major challenge in the human services is finding and especially retaining professional direct service staff trained to provide an array of critically needed health, mental health and social services to individuals, families, and communities.

A more recent trend is employing professional staff on a contingency basis. Contingent workers are "… persons who do not expect their jobs to last or who reported that their jobs are temporary. They do not have an implicit or explicit contract for ongoing employment" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Most attention on contingency work has focused on "gig," service, and low skill segments of the labor market (Guerrina, Burns, & Conlon, 2011; Hacker, 2008; Heller, 2017; Tyler, 2008). Promoted as a means of increasing flexibility and innovation, recent studies have noted serious repercussions for income

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and benefit security, work engagement and stability, career development, health and safety issues, and work-life balance (Cummings & Kreiss, 2008; Holm, Torkelson & Bäckström, 2016; Kossek et al, 2016; Lambert, 2008; Swanberg, et al, 2011). There is evidence to suggest that contingency workers, who tend to be younger, female, and people of color, are postponing various family related decisions such as homebuying or having children, due to economic instability (Rao, 2018; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2009). Industries that rely on contingency workers now are reporting that worksites have become fissured and organizational cultures disrupted (Holm, Torkelson & Bäckström, 2016; Weil, 2014). Studies also indicate a new form of discipline through performance management that further erodes organizational cooperation (Brodkin, 2013; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2013).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 1/3 of the education and health services workforce is categorized as contingent, though there is no breakdown within this industry by educational degree or credentials (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Further, there is evidence that education and health industry jobs with high skill level and educational requirements (e.g., graduate degrees) increasingly are being filled through contingent arrangements; university adjunct professors probably are the most familiar example (Carey, 2011; Childress, 2019; Gibleman, 2005; Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Lapalme & Doucet, 2018; Pentariki & Dionysopoulou, 2018; Van Harten, Knies, & Leisink, 2017). There is, however, relatively little research on understanding the reasons for and consequences of employing these skilled professionals as contingency workers, how they fare in comparison to permanent direct service staff, or larger implications for agency culture and climate.

Views from Direct Service Workers in Human Service Agencies

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In interviews[1] with professionally trained direct service workers, both permanent and contingency status, there were common threads that underscored overburdened and under resourced agencies. There was considerable economic instability, especially for contingent staff, due to poor salaries (in New Mexico, one MSW required job was listed for $18,000 a year), loan debt among recent graduates, and increased costs of living. They reported feeling disconnected from agency life, especially their colleagues, and believed that service delivery was becoming increasingly fragmented. Perhaps most telling were the contradictions they experienced in trying to do work in which they were (at least initially) highly invested. These contradictions include:

- Atomized work: Workflow in agencies often resembled an assembly line rather than engaged, relationship centered processes. Clients are seen and dispatched; then repeat. There is little time for collaborative work or consultation with colleagues, which is a critical part of problem solving and ethical accountability. As one staff member said: "I thought social work was social. But it isn't. It's just work and I'm really starting to hate it."

- Weaponizing passion: Human service workers go into this field because they profess a commitment to ameliorating particular problems or working with certain populations. They are "encouraged" to perform over and above their job scope or hours because "clients need them." The refrain – "what about the clients," is used to guilt workers into doing more and when they refuse to provide extra, uncompensated labor, their dedication (and time management skills) is questioned. Brianna, a psychotherapist in a nonprofit counseling center, summed up this situation: "I really want to like my job. I love my clients and I believe in the work I do. I've been with my current employer for about 16-17 months, and I've gotten so exhausted by them constantly asking for me to labor for them for free. They are constantly begging full-time, salaried people to cover 3-hour therapy groups, with an additional hour of notes, for no pay. Broken into an hourly rate, my salary translates to about $40 an hour. It would cost them $160 per

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[1] These interviews with direct service workers are part of a larger study on labor conditions in human services. Originally focused on the reasons for and consequences of contingency staffing (Hyde, 2020; 2021), the research has expanded to understand the daily lives of human service managers and workers.

additional session. It's telling that I'd rather have the time free than the $160, but at least if they paid me my rate, I wouldn't feel so denigrated. I am a terminally credentialed LCSW. I am skilled and competent and well-versed in my subfield. I already have a caseload of 25-30 clients and run 9 hours of group a week as part of my regular workload. I am compassionate and my clients almost uniformly have positive things to say about me. I could start working a private practice and begin with charging folks $150 an hour. So, management shouldn't turn around and tell me my labor is literally worthless and if I don't do their bidding for free that I don't care about the clients."

- Pay to play: Social work students pay tuition and fees in order to secure internships required for the MSW. To get and keep licensure, workers pay for continuing education classes, licensure exams, and supervision. These costs used to be borne, partially or fully, by a worker's agency. Add to this the (finally) verified data that the licensure exam has significantly higher fail rates for people of color because it is normed on white, middle-class standards (need cite). It is expensive to become and continue as a direct service worker, as this Black caseworker noted: "I had debt coming out of school. My job allowed me to stay on probation until I got my license. But I failed that [expletive] exam twice. That is, I paid for prep, supervision, and exam fees twice without getting anything! I guess the third time is a charm because I finally passed and have my LSW. Of course, I need to worry about how I'm going to manage the next step. It's such a racquet. I continue to go into debt to help people I care about."

These contradictions are designed to extract labor at no cost to the agency. Unpaid interns, who should be students but often are used as temporary workers, provide surplus labor. Direct staff who do their paperwork during nonworking hours provide surplus labor. Human service agencies increasingly rely on the uncompensated, extracted labor to meet (or attempt to meet) client demands. The problem of inadequate resources is solved on the backs of the staff.

What Can Be Done?

In their report on the need to support and strengthen the human service sector, Morris and Roberts state that "both recipients of human services and society as a whole face significant risks if the human

services ecosystem is not financially strong and able to deliver on its potential. The consequences range from negative health and behavioral outcomes to elevated health and criminal justice and corrections system expenses" (2018, p. 17). Since that report was issued, there are few sustained efforts on the national stage to bolster and expand that ecosystem. Instead, as predicted, the carceral system has increased (it also is a primary point of delivery for human services to Black and Brown service users). The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the dire circumstances within the human service sector.

To date, the professional associations that represent the human service workforce have done little on behalf of workers to directly challenge neoliberal policies and practices. For example, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in its recent Code of Ethics revision, now indicates that "self-care" is an individual social workers responsibility. There is no mention of agency context or the systemic reasons for why social workers feel burned out, alienated, or disengaged to the point of resignation. Indeed, it often seems as though social work associations assume that organizational climate and culture have little bearing on one's actual practice.

There are, however, important developments outside of these associations that call attention to and address working conditions in human service agencies. Briefly, some examples are:

- Social Work Equity Campaign (https://www.swequitycampaign.info/home): a nation-wide effort of concerned educators and practitioners to address "deplorable salaries, ballooning workloads, demands for unpaid overtime, and racial and gender inequality" through advocacy efforts directed primarily at professional associations such as NASW.

- Increased unionization in human service organizations: these efforts are part of broader resurgence of labor mobilization such as the well-publicized Starbucks and Amazon warehouse campaigns. Within human service agencies, it appears to be younger workers leading these efforts as they are refusing the norms of low pay and work overload. Established unions such as AFSCME and SEIU are making concerted engagement efforts with human service workers. Organized groups, such as Social Service Workers United

(https://socialserviceworkersunited.medium.com/) mobilize for better pay, improved working conditions, and "collective liberation."

- Abolition Initiatives in social work and allied disciplines have targeted the carceral and child welfare systems as institutions of social control aimed primarily at people of color. While not focused on workforce issues, per se, these efforts shift attention to how labor gets used in ways that surveil and punish marginalized populations as well as signify how neoliberal policies get implemented and in turn how the human service sector bolsters neoliberalism. For example, the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work (NAASW) "strives to amplify a practice of social work aimed at dismantling the prison industrial complex" (https://www.naasw.com/) through research, political education, organizing and advocacy. In recent years, the American Public Health Association (public health practitioners are another segment of the human service workforce) has centered discussions on public health as abolition work, and including policy statements asserting that police violence is a public health issue, and the harms of the carceral system as a public health issue (https://www.apha.org/Policies-and-Advocacy/Public-Health-Policy-Statements/Policy-Database/2022/01/07/Advancing-Public-Health-Interventions-to-Address-the-Harms-of-the-Carceral-System). Implications of abolition praxis for nonprofit human service agencies are significant, as many contract with public criminal justice and child welfare institutions and essentially perform surveillance and control work.

- Examination and revision of nonprofit management training and education that moves the focus away from managerialism and marketization skills and towards support for the more altruistic aspects of nonprofit missions. Sandberg & Elliott (2019) outline one such framework with a "care-centered" model for nonprofit management. This model recognizes that in addition to promoting the civic role of nonprofits, managers need to engage in, and facilitate organizations environments for, the nurturing and support of staff and consumers.

- "Quiet quitting:" this version of working to contract has received considerable attention lately (Klotz & Bolino, 2022; Kruger, 2022; Nyce, 2022). It is a misnamed concept because it isn't actually exiting employment (though there is a significant number of individuals leaving human service work). Rather, a worker is doing the minimum requirements of their job. In human services, scaling back to what the job requires rather than what is being demanded is significant. As noted above, considerable surplus labor is extracted from workers when they perform tasks after hours or take on new responsibilities without additional compensation. While only anecdotal evidence, there does seem to be a scaling back by human service workers (again the younger ones) of engaging in work over and above what they are paid to do. While an individual, rather than collective, strategy, quiet quitting does represent an attempt to assert control over one's scope of work and recalibrate work-life balance.

Yet more needs to be done to address a sector, and its workforce, that are at the breaking point. Professional associations that uphold mainstream gatekeeping functions through educational accreditation and practitioner licensing largely are silent. Instead, they extol the virtues of sacrifice as a metric of dedication, promote alliances with policing, and recommend individual responsibility for what are systemic issues. These and other positions maintain the human services workforce in the cycle of neoliberalism. Indeed, they become just one more cog in the neoliberal machine.

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Figure 1: Neoliberalism's Impact on the Human Service Sector and Agencies

Economic Precarity

Neoliberal Policies & Regulations

- •"Greed is good"
- •Individualism
- •Austerity measures
- •Private market solutions/anti-state

Job insecurity
Food scarcity
Housing scarcity

Intensified health/mental health needs

Impact on Human Service Sector

- •Race to the bottom (devolution)
- •Privatization
- •Resource Scarcity
- •Delegitimation

Client & Community Demands

Human Service Agency Strategies

- •Managerialism
- •Client churning
- •Under compensation
- •Precarious staffing