Article

Critical Reflection: An Imperative Skill for Social Work Practice in Neoliberal Organisations?

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Abstract: Social work practice and education have been significantly impacted by neoliberal governmentality, which can greatly undermine the espoused social justice mission of social work. This study explores the research questions: How might critical reflection support social work practice in neoliberal organisations? And how might critical analysis using insights from critical theorists fortify the findings of critically reflective research? This study uses critical reflection on a critical incident (from Author 2's practice) as a methodology to respond to the first research question. It further analyses the findings of the critically reflective inquiry by drawing on relevant concepts from critical theorists to respond to the second question and expand the possibilities for practitioners to develop emancipatory practices in neoliberal organisations. The findings suggest critical reflection on the critical incident examined was effective in improving social work practice, and that additional critical analysis of the wider issues raised by the research findings may enhance social work as a value-driven, client-centred and social change-oriented profession. The article highlights the benefits and outcomes of working in a critically reflective way, and makes an original contribution to the growing literature that suggests critical reflection is a vital skill for social work practice in neoliberal organisations.

Keywords: critical reflection; critical analysis; social work practice; neoliberalism; managerialism

1. Introduction

The neoliberalisation of the welfare sector, and of social work education and practice, has had significant impacts on contemporary human service organisations, which are deeply characterised by managerial practices and governmentality (see for example Swift et al. 2016; Hendrix et al. 2020). Within this context, social workers who espouse a commitment to social justice goals may find our practices compromised, even when committed to critical social work (Fraser and Taylor 2016). But (how) might critical reflection support social work practice in neoliberal organisations? And how might critical analysis using insights from critical social theorists fortify the findings of critically reflective research? Through applying Fook (2016) model of critical reflection both as an education tool and methodological approach, this paper presents research that analyses a critical incident from Author 2's practice. The findings suggest critical reflection on the critical incident substantially changed and improved social work practice, therefore highlighting the benefits of working in a critically reflective way. Furthermore, critically analysing the findings of the research by drawing on social theorists further unmasked the insidious operations of neoliberalism on social work practice and elucidated the possibilities for practitioners to think and act beyond the constraints of neoliberal discourses. This has systematic benefits for practitioners, service users and organisations alike, and holds important implications for social work education.

2. The Neoliberalisation of the Welfare Sector

The organisational contexts in which social workers' practise have been progressively and forcefully dominated by neoliberal policy and associated managerial practices for almost four decades (see for example Ferguson and Lavalette 2006; Wallace and Pease 2011; Madhu 2011; Garrett 2017, 2018; Boryczko 2019; Hanesworth 2017; Reisch 2013; Fenton 2014; Abramovitz and Zelnick 2015; Liebenberg et al. 2015; Hyslop 2018).

Neoliberal discourse, which operates to justify of the dominance of global capitalism, fosters privatisation, commodification, and deregulation of ostensibly 'free' markets, and market-driven objectives (Giroux 2015; Reisch 2013; Hudson 2017). It widens the gap between rich and poor by systematically enabling a wealthy elite to monopolise resources, creating scarcity for everyone else (Fraser and Seymour 2017; Garrett 2010; Morley et al. 2019c). Hence, the consequences of neoliberalism, which are now all well documented in the literature, are profoundly harmful for both the quality of social work practice, and the clients of social work services (See for example Garrett 2017; Hanesworth 2017). In short, disadvantaged groups face increased hardship. As Swift et al. (2016, p. 386) note, "social workers . . . are dealing with increasing damage to the most marginalized populations as the result of poverty, decreased social spending, demonizing discourses, and sometimes violent repression."

Within this context, as the needs of service users increase and become more complex, paradoxically, organisational responses are rationing support; instead prioritising the development of more streamlined, impersonal and business-like practice responses, which are assumed to be more efficient and therefore cost-effective (see for example Wallace and Pease 2011; Spolander et al. 2014). As Herrero and Charnley (2021, p. 1) observe in commenting on the state of affairs in the United Kingdom: "government led reforms of social work embracing neoliberalism have led to the marketization of service delivery, the growth of new managerialism, and the reshaping of training to encourage technicist models of social work." Such reforms assume that all problems are financially based and can be solved with technical solutions, such as reducing the costs of services, increasing efficiency and intensifying the workloads of practitioners to extract more value (Fraser and Seymour 2017; Hendrix et al. 2020). Value is thought to be enhanced by competition. In identifying the logic underpinning such reforms Garrett (2010, p. 341) argues:

> neoliberalism seeks to inject a fresh and reinvigorated emphasis on 'competition' at all levels of society, including those areas of life and social interaction which were previously perceived as beyond the reach of competition and commodification.

This includes commodifying social work services and the material resources social workers administer, and orchestrating competition among service users, who are forced to compete to access services and resources, by demonstrating their eligibility (and implicitly, their worthiness). Tacitly, neoliberal principles inhere the view that most service users will try to access more resources (including time) than their fair share, and to manage this, assessment has become the most emphasised part of social work practice (Sakellariou and Rotarou 2017; Gray et al. 2015; Carey 2019).

Ironically, part of the 'efficiency' culture involves cluttering practitioners' time with administrative tasks that both reflect and produce the managerial revolution (Rogowski 2018). This unnecessary bureaucracy creates a relentless busyness among practitioners who are required to participate in training, endless reporting, risk assessing and management, auditing, responding to compliance requirements and trying to re-apply for program funding (which is almost always highly competitive, not recurrent and therefore tenuous) (Baines 2006; Swift et al. 2016; Samsonsen and Turney 2016).

This reorientation of work, including spending significant time submitting tenders to compete with other services, who would otherwise be collaborators in providing more holistic support for service users, is problematic for two main (related) reasons. The first concerns how the precarity of organisational funding, not only stifles the capacities of organisations to plan for longer-term initiatives (Samsonsen and Turney 2016; Gray et al.

2015), but also creates a casualisation of the human service sector's staff (Baines 2006). This is because business managers aim to create 'flexible' workforces, resulting in precarious employment for practitioners who feel they must comply with organisation practices, even if they are unjust. Garrett (2010, p. 346) notes this 'insecurity' impacting both social workers and clients, is evident in the increase of short-term and precarious patterns of employment. Combined, the result of insecure work, the increasing administrivia, the emphasis on cutting costs, and the focus on organisational efficiency, result in many practitioners feeling less supported, having higher work loads, increased rates of stress, greater attrition (Chiller and Crisp 2012), and ultimately less capacity to work towards social justice (Morley and Macfarlane 2014). Precariously employed workers are less inclined to challenge problematic practices because of the threat to livelihood. In addition, the templated, formulaic style of practice that is becoming more prevalent in social work, creates the impression that complying with organisational policy and procedure automatically results in 'ethical' practice (Banks 2012; Fenton 2014), resulting in practices inconsistent with the values of social work. Even in community-based services and non-government organisations, practice is now dependent on funding tied to certain outputs and agendas that both limit and define social work. Regardless of resistance, social workers are therefore often enlisted into the neoliberal project (Banks and Hulme 2012).

The other main problem caused by the manufactured tasks of neoliberal managerialism, is that they commandeer an enormous amount of time, barely leaving practitioners with a moment to think (see for example Holscher and Sewpaul 2006). Orchestrating *time-poverty* among social work practitioners means that we may simply 'do' rather than 'thinking critically' about what we are doing (Adams et al. 2009). Within this context, critical reflection in organisational cultures submerged in the murky depths of neoliberal governmentality, may "fail to encourage and reinforce a reflective approach and may have a pervasive (and possibly long-term) adverse influence on students' [and qualified social workers'] attitudes and orientation towards reflective practice" (Wilson 2013, p. 168). Wilson (2013, p. 168) further explains that:

> There is a danger that immersion in such cultures may lead to the 'ritualization' of reflective practice to the point at which it becomes, ironically, a 'tick box' exercise that is inimical to the development of critical thinking and undermines the learning process.

Having a sense of being too busy to think and/or engaging in a from of reflection that has been stripped of its capacity to assist practitioners to think critically, also serves the purpose of diverting social workers away from "social justice, human rights, [and] collective responsibility" priorities (IFSW International Federation of Social Workers). Unfortunately, this new focus reshapes social work practice as a conservative/establishment, technical, routinised and individual-reform-orientated endeavour (Morley et al. 2017; Morley et al. 2019c; Reisch 2013; Hudson 2017), rather than a critical project. As Swift et al. (2016, p. 385) note, social workers "are now conscripted into rationing services, policing 'dependency' and patrolling the boundaries established by the neoliberal project." At the practice level, these discourses encourage practitioners' to impose barriers, effectively justifying organisational practices that exclude service users and/or block their access to the resources they seek (Fraser and Taylor 2016). Perversely within neoliberal organisations, enacting this form of oppression can masquerade as ethical or responsible practice to prevent people from forming dependency, accessing 'too much' support, and/or violating appropriate professional boundaries.

Social work education, which has been regarded as one of the last bastions to protect critical thinking and analysis in social work practice (Morley et al. 2020), has also, in many cases been stripped of its criticality in favour of technicist, competency driven, and evidenced-based forms of practice, which often reproduce dominant ideologies (see for example, Garrett 2010; Fenton 2014; Preston and Aslett 2014; Giroux 2014; Fraser and Taylor 2016; Swift et al. 2016; Morley et al. 2017; Ferguson 2017; Cleary 2019. Within this context social work educators, who are similarly overburdened (as practitioners) with

administrative tasks have little opportunity to innovate, and may engage in a form of self-censorship, rather than confront and seek to challenge hegemonic worldviews (Giroux 2015; Fraser and Taylor 2016).

However, an exclusive analysis of the structural and/or institutional factors implicated in neoliberal social work, can obscure a key machination of neoliberalism, which Macias (2015, p. 255) describes as:

> its effects in producing subjects that, while suffering the detrimental effects of neoliberal deregulation, nevertheless internalize neoliberal discourses and use them to understand themselves and others as rational, calculative, enterprising, and individually responsibilized subjects.

> (see also Madhu 2011; Bay 2011; Brown 2005)

As such, contemporary social work, according to some authors, is not only impacted by neoliberalism but has become a tool of neoliberalism (Holscher and Sewpaul 2006; George et al. 2007; Madhu 2011; Macias 2015; Swift et al. 2016). Brown (2005) for example, argues neoliberalism not only inflicts a certain economic view of reality, but recruits others into adopting neoliberal technologies of the self. As she states, these "highly prescribed discourses of rationality and calculability . . . [are assumed to] equate moral responsibility with rational action" (Brown 2005, p. 42). Rose (1999, p. 152) similarly highlights how particular market rationalities imposed by neoliberalism embed themselves into people's sense of subjectivity, who then begin to:

> translate their activities into financial terms, to seek to maximize productivity . . . to cut out waste, to restructure activities that [are] not cost-effective, to choose between priorities in terms of their relative costs and benefits, to become more or less like a financial manager of their own professional activities.

> (as cited in Macias 2015, p. 255)

Related to this, Swift et al. (2016, p. 386) talks about how social workers who have become 'neoliberal subjects' have "lost the language and imagination for any other path", and thereby seek to similarly transform others (such as their clients and co-workers, for example) into neoliberal subjects.

There are, or course, multiple problems with social workers becoming agents of neoliberalism. Of primary concern is the potential compromise of our responsibilities to advocate for social justice, to remove structural barriers that cause disadvantage, and to champion the rights of humans, animals and the planet, beyond being consumed as fodder for neoliberal capitalism (See for example, Fraser and Taylor 2016). While the challenges presented by contemporary human service organisational contexts that are saturated in neoliberalism are immense, this study explores how (or whether) critical reflection can assist social workers to align their espoused values with their actual practice. It seeks to understand how (or whether) critical reflection might disrupt the cycles of thinking that impose compliance and conformity to neoliberal objectives. And how (or whether) it might unsettle organisational practices that seek to stifle the emancipatory potential of social work. The primary research questions for this study are: (How) might a critically reflective approach support social work practice in neoliberal organisations? And how might critical analysis using insights from critical theorists fortify the findings of critically reflective research? In particular, this research examines the use of Fook (2016) model of critical reflection in one specific (neoliberal) organisational context (drawn from Author 2's practice), and explores how the initial findings of the research process may be strengthened by further analysis that draws on the work of a range of critical theorists.

3. Critical Reflection as a Methodology

Critical reflection was used as an exploratory, qualitative method to investigate the primary research question in this study. This methodological approach was chosen because it has been shown to be a potentially transformative method of research (Morley 2008). While a plethora of reflective models exist, we particularly chose Jan Fook (2016) model as

a method of inquiry because it has been successfully used as a research methodology in a number of other projects that similarly aimed to assist practitioners to think creatively and generate new practice strategies that transcend dominant constructions of problems faced by social workers in practice (see for example, Morley 2014; Allen 2013; Morley and Stenhouse 2020; Morley and O'Connor 2016; Morley et al. 2019a; Curtis and Morley 2019; Mueller and Morley 2020). This model draws on a combination of ideas from relevant frameworks including critical and post-structural theories, adult learning principles, models of reflective practice, and practices of reflexivity (Fook 2016). While generative of new knowledge to inform future practice, it simultaneously seeks to offer learning opportunities to practitioners researching their own practice, and therefore has a strong educational component. The critical reflection process is informed and enhanced by critical poststructural theorising, which in combination, adopt a critical analysis of society while rejecting universalised and singular ways of knowing to generate multiple perspectives (Fook 2016).

Critical reflection generates practice-based evidence. This can be considered both a strength and a limitation of this approach to research. For example, the data (and findings) of the research are directly obtained from the practitioner's/researcher's experience, so in this sense it represents an 'incontrovertible' form of data (Brookfield 1990, p. 180) grounded in the specific context in which the practice occurred (Morley 2008). While the practitioner/researcher collects and generates data simultaneously (Morley 2013), the data analysis can be undertaken by multiple researchers (i.e., both Author 1 and Author 2 in this research), and should also be recognisable or replicable by other researchers who engage in critical analysis of the same data (Mueller and Morley 2020). This is a limitation, but it is not the purpose of this study (See Morley 2008). This research cannot therefore develop a pragmatic 'how to' guide for engaging in day-to-day practice within all neoliberal organisational contexts. It instead aims to elucidate the ways critical analysis and reflection might equip the practitioner with broad principles that may assist them to recognise the impacts of neoliberalism and think beyond the challenges they face in their own situations.

In constructivist and critical research paradigms, reflexivity is adopted as a measure of quality emphasised over traditional notions of reliability and validity that are associated with positivist research paradigms (Morley 2008). In addition, the findings do not try to explain cause and effect (Loftus et al. 2011), but rather seek different understandings of experience that may uncover new practice possibilities (Morley 2014).

4. Method

The first step in this research process involved Author 2 recognising and recording (in written form) a critical incident from his practice (Fook 2016). A critical incident can be any practice situation significant to the practitioner for any reason (Fook 2016). For Author 2 the critical incident was chosen because it was troubling for him. We selected this particular critical incident for this study because it highlights the challenges neoliberalism poses for social work practitioners in contemporary organisations, even when they are committed to doing critical practice.

Using Fook (2016) critical reflection model, the next stage of the research process is to subject the narrative to deconstruction. Deconstruction aims to understand how problems are framed within the narrative, through uncovering embedded (often unconscious) assumptions about key social phenomena including power and one's sense of identity and role (Fook 2016). It also highlights the presence and limitations of binary oppositional thinking and exposes the operation of dominant discourses, that can result in prejudices that undermine critical practice (Morley 2013, 2014, 2020). Deconstruction seeks to unearth multiple interpretations of the same narrative, and therefore new ways to think and act in relation to the critical incident (Morley 2014).

Following deconstruction of the critical incident, the next part of data analysis involves reconstruction, or re-authoring the narrative with an emancipatory intent. The aim is to

transform the initial construction of the critical incident to develop new interpretations of the same situation, in a way that privileges a critical poststructural view (Fook 2016).

While Fook (2016) model of critical reflection can be undertaken by a single practitioner, examining one's own practice, in this study the authors worked in partnership to deconstruct and reconstruct Author 2's critical incident. Author 1 was a coursework teacher of a unit on critical reflection, and Author 2 was a student in this class. In this sense Author 1 acted in a supervisory capacity to support Author's 2's research into his practice. As a result, the findings produced by this study were co-constructed between both authors. Author 2 provided the initial description and deconstruction of a critical incident from his social work practice, as a student on placement. The incident was then analysed by both authors with consideration of how meaning was constructed, the language used to privilege certain meanings, whose perspectives were dominant and which were distorted and/or missing, and who is served and not served by these constructions (Brookfield 1995; Fook 2016; Morley 2014, 2020). As Brookfield (2017, p. 9) suggests, educators can assist students to "uncover how educational processes and interactions are framed by wider structures of power and dominant ideology"; and "to uncover assumptions and practices that . . . end up working against their own" espoused values and practice framework.

This paper summarises the key findings from this research collaboration, and in adding a step to Fook (2016) model, Author 1 critically analyses the outcomes of Author 2's critical reflection, in order to further elucidate the impacts of neoliberalism on social work practice in organisations, and strengthen practitioners' capacity for resistance and change. The additional step addresses Watts (2019) critique of Fook's model of critical reflection, which asserts the need for a more systematic form of reflection that incorporates broader links to social theory and philosophical thought.

5. Author 2's Narrative about the Critical Incident (Research Data)
Author 2

As a critical social work student at an NGO working with families involved with child protection, I received an email from a woman asking for a call back. She was a citizen of another English-speaking country, a mother of two with a newborn, in a violent relationship, and had a number of mental health diagnoses. In the email, she asked for support and explained that she was feeling under a lot of pressure that day, due to Centrelink requirements, transport issues, groceries and problems with her partner.

Before calling, I showed the email to my supervisor. My supervisor told me that it was likely her anxiety, and not to promise anything, but say that I was busy with other service users for the rest of the day as I had already given her enough time. I was told to listen, empathise and try to help her use mindfulness strategies to calm down.

I called her and followed my supervisors' instructions. I aimed to remain emotionally distant, neutral but still empathetic attempting to use my professional expertise to help this service user take responsibility for the problem that she found herself in. As the call went on, I noticed a gradual increase in distress, anger and tears from the service user. During the call she explained her struggles that day. I felt as though she was trying to convince me that she should be a priority for me that day. I felt like visiting her would have been a waste of time as similar visits in previous weeks had resulted in little progress from my perspective. I explained that I did not know how I could help her immediately, but I could visit her tomorrow. She finished with saying that, "life was really hard when people are mean, horrible and put you down." I agreed that it was. She said that she did not know how she was going to get anything done that day, she continued to cry and then ended the call.

In my initial research proposal, I had noted that there was "very little research exploring how social workers can practically respond to boundary violations from a critical perspective." Hence my goal was to apply "critical reflection as a research method to develop new knowledge to help social workers to develop a critical response to boundary violations." The initial research question was: How can critical reflection help critical

social workers to respond to boundary violations from service users? Hence, despite my best efforts, my first account attests that my framing of the problem had been somewhat co-opted by neoliberal discourses.

6. Deconstruction

Author 1

In reviewing Author 2's initial research proposal, I could see his strong to commitment to critical social work approaches, but also the struggle to implement them into practice in this organisational context that was dominated by neoliberalism. In seeking to reorient the focus of the research, as part of the deconstructions process, I asked a series of questions to prompt Author 2 to engage in critical reflection. Some of the key questions included:

- How else might we understand the client's behaviour? What might be some of the unintended consequences of constructing the client's behaviour as a 'boundary violation'?
- Why have you included her mental health diagnoses in your initial description of the client? What purpose does this serve? How might your understanding of her behaviour change if you emphasise the structural difficulties she is facing?
- Why did you defer to your supervisor before responding your client? What implications did this have for your practice? What did you think of your supervisor's instructions? How do they align with the values of critical social work practice?
- How does one "remain emotionally distant, neutral but still empathetic"? How might critical perspectives suggest a different approach?
- How might dominant discourses such as neoliberalism be influencing your view that she should "take responsibility for the problem that she found herself in"?
- How did you theorise the "gradual increase in distress, anger and tears from the service user"?
- When you felt like she was trying to convince you that she should be a priority for you that day, did you feel like she was behaving inappropriately? Why?
- Why should she have to convince you that she is a priority?
- What did 'progress' in working with her look like from your perspective? And what is missing from this construction? What might be some other interpretations of 'progress'?

Author 2 responded very effectively to this line of inquiry, as outlined below.

7. Data Analysis: Deconstruction

Author 2

In deconstructing my narrative about the critical incident in light of Author 1's questions, I recognised that my interactions with this service user were governed by a script I was given by a worker immersed in neoliberal discourses, and I uncritically followed it attempting to protect the service's, and my own, time (Liebenberg et al. 2015; Hyslop 2018). I unknowingly adopted the use of neoliberal discourses and the concept of professional boundaries (as defined by psychologised discourses) to 'encourage' the service user to help herself (O'Leary et al. 2013). This is evident in my use of language when I refer to trying to get her to take personal responsibility for the situation she found herself in, hence completely neglecting a critical analysis of structural issues. Furthermore, I uncritically accepted the medical construction of this women's problem (anxiety) and focused on treating the pathologies that we constructed her as having. This blinded me to the service user's level of vulnerability and disadvantage and as a result I missed the wider social problems by focusing on her behaviour by teaching her to engage properly (reasonably) with the service, by not violating my boundaries (see also Fraser and Seymour 2017; Morley et al. 2019c).

This focus also led me to neglect valuing the wisdom that she bought to our interaction. Upon reflection, the service user appeared to be resourcefully using her own agency to access support, although I could not see this at the time because of neoliberal constructions

which viewed her as demanding and needy, and therefore in need of education from the service (and me) about appropriate boundaries. By accepting the neoliberal script and uncritically focusing on the medical construction I used my structural power in an arbitrary way as a 'professional' to block her from accessing support and taking steps in her attempt to regain control of her life by leaving a violent relationship. This would be an important part of her recovery (Laing et al. 2013, pp. 57–58). O'Leary et al. (2013) refers to similar practice in their research, that would suggest that my unwitting use of neoliberal discourses to construct this situation, and the imposition of professional boundaries (as defined by psychologised discourses) with this woman, falls far short of emancipatory change, empowering people and valuing self-determination. This was definitely not part of my intended practice. These non-conscious acts of domination were inextricably linked to my analysis of the situation, which within a neoliberal context, had become individualised and punitive (see also, Fraser and Jarldorn 2018).

The deconstruction highlighted that the way I engaged with this service user was harmful. It revealed that how I constructed the problem was insufficient and narrow. I recognised boundary violation was not the issue, but rather, that I needed to find ways to transcend thinking and practice that had been captured by neoliberalism in order to develop a critical practice approach to this situation. Furthermore, I realised I did not have to comply with the instructions of my supervisor or the script. The purpose and direction of the research therefore changed to explore the question: How might critical reflection support critical social work practice in neoliberal organisations?

8. Reconstruction

Author 1

In the context of this research, the aim was to enable the Author 2 to see beyond neoliberal constructions of the problem and instead privilege social justice concerns. Some of the questions I posed to assist him with reconstructing his critical incident included:

- How might privileging the structural factors that are impacting on the client's situation, change your description of her situation?
- How else might you interpret your/the agency's time and resources?
- How would your practice change if you saw her request for assistance as legitimate?
- How might your practice change if you saw her as central to your role and therefore worthy of your time?
- What does progress or productive work with the client look like from a critical perspective?
- Are there things you would do differently if the same situation arose in the future? In hindsight, how would you have ideally liked to respond to her?

9. Data Analysis: Reconstruction

Author 2

In reconstructing the critical incident, I found it useful to draw on a Marxist analysis, which highlights that my conception that my resources and time (and that of the agency) are scarce. A Marxist view would label this assumption as a capitalist myth, designed to control the masses (Singer 2001), and certainly had an impact on my perception of these resources in my own practice.

Labelling that construction as a capitalist myth helped me see I had agency in that situation to act differently (Singer 2001; Fook 2016). As I noted in my deconstruction, I actually did have the autonomy and discretion to ignore the script, but chose to follow at the time, without thinking. Furthermore, a Marxist analysis of this situation highlights that the behaviour of the service user was highly influenced by her material disadvantage (Singer 2001; Lavalette 2020), in which financial hardship was a significant contributing factor to her state of mind and behaviour at the time of the phone call, rather than faulty thinking. Adopting a critical lens to understand her situation emphasised that I had agency to support her in practical and meaningful ways beyond simply administering

psychological first aid to try and make her more self-reliant or calm (also see Fraser and Seymour 2017).

A feminist analysis of this situation also provided some assistance with reconstructing the critical incident. For example, a feminist analysis brought my attention to the presence of domestic violence in her life and its effects on all aspects of her being (Laing et al. 2013). In addition it highlights the necessity to name the oppression caused by domestic violence as a core part of supporting a victim's/survivor's recovery and a key step in social change (Laing et al. 2013). Focusing on this aspect of the client's situation would lead a feminist practitioner to value her construction of the situation and engage in a way that maximises her self-determination (Liebenberg et al. 2015; Heywood 2007; Payne 2014). Feminist perspectives also bring attention to her experiences as a mother living in a patriarchal system that privileges men's experience and is often blind to the challenges of women (Fraser 2008; Heywood 2007). As a male practitioner, this lens could have helped me value the process of working with this woman to achieve her goals; thus creating an interaction that promotes her recovery, rather than the non-conscious act of domination and violence in the form of neoliberal practice that occurred (Liebenberg et al. 2015; Morley 2012).

Therefore, had I seen this woman through a Marxist and feminist lens instead of a psychological one enmeshed in neoliberalism, I would have defined the problem and my role, very differently. This could have led to a completely different kind of interaction with the client, which is much more respectful, responsive to her needs and aligned with the goals and values of a critical perspective, despite working in a neoliberal dominated context.

A feminist analysis also highlights the importance and benefits of a connection model rather than a distance model. Adopting this perspective, critical reflection on my practice supports the view the service users can collaborate better, feel safer and experience a more authentic relationship when they are emotionally connected with a practitioner (Laing et al. 2013). This view is also acknowledged in the literature in that cold, distant relationships defined by the imposition of professional boundaries are not effective at building trust (Reimer 2014). Furthermore, Dietz and Thompson (2004) suggest professional boundaries are used to create distance and rules for services users, and therefore set up hierarchical relationships that exert power over service users, reinforcing patriarchal power relations.

Both Marxist and feminist perspectives applied to help with reconstructing this critical incident, promote a more egalitarian approach to the relationship (Singer 2001; Dietz and Thompson 2004), which aligns more closely with the social work values of empowerment, self-determination and social justice (O'Leary et al. 2013).

10. Critical Analysis of the Findings of the Critical Reflection Research

Using Fook (2016) model, which is underpinned by critical and poststructural theories (Fook 2016), enables the conceptual space to consider and incorporate the contributions of other critical thinkers, which may enhance the capacity of critical reflection to assist practitioners to robustly resist neoliberalism and/or devise additional creative ways to navigate neoliberal organisations. Here, we respond to the second research question: How might critical analysis using insights from social theorists fortify the findings of critically reflective research? In order to do this, Author 1 drew on a selection of key ideas from several critical theorists to more deeply theorise the practice issues raised by Author 2's critical reflection. The particular theorists were chosen for the relevance of their ideas to the specific issues raised. The analysis is by no means exhaustive and it is acknowledged that the work of many different combinations of theorists may have equal applicability and value. Given that previous research about the impacts of neoliberalism indicates the issues raised by the findings of this research are endemic to contemporary social work, it should be emphasised that the critical analysis presented here aims not simply to focus on Author 2's practice, but social work practice in neoliberal contexts across the board.

11. Unmasking the Insidious Operations of Neoliberalism on Social Work Practice

In deepening our analysis of neoliberalism in organisations, Avishai Margalit's work on *The Decent Society* (Margalit 1996) for example, provides in Hallahan (2020, p. 233), words, "a compelling indictment on the privacy-impinging, bureaucratic functions of the welfare state that humiliates dependent citizens, contributing, alongside other institutions, to the emergence of an indecent society." Margalit's analysis relates directly to the operations of services that exist to support people in need, yet systematically and indecently humiliate them through punitive, bureaucratic, 'professional' practices that discipline and cause harm to people seeking assistance. Margalit's work therefore directly enhances critical reflection on the damaging consequences of contemporary organisational practices that weaponise professional boundaries as a means to deny service users (who are constructed as 'resource intensive') access to resources and/or a service. Meanwhile, such responses are presented as objective, neutral and evidence-based (Macias 2015), often dressed in the language of empowerment of benevolence and justified as assisting people to develop resilience (Garrett 2017).

Hannah Arendt (1963) work on the "banality of evil" is similarly useful in theorising the operations of neoliberalism on social work practice. Springer (2012, p. 140) has drawn on ideas from both Arendt and Bourdieu to discuss a process that occurs over time where "exceptional violence" risks becoming common practice or "exemplary". He further explains that "exemplary violence is most effective when it is no longer recognised as violence, a malignant form of unconsciousness that Bourdieu (2001) referred to as "symbolic violence" (Springer 2012, p. 140). This is where Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" finds expression in social work practice, in that everyday practices of violence are routinised and potentially committed by any of us who simply accept the existing social order without question (Springer 2012, p. 140).

The manufacture of scripts to standardise practitioners' responses and remove professional discretion is now becoming more widespread in social work practice (Ponnert and Svensson 2016). Foucault (1995) work on the govermentality (particularly neoliberal governance), which refers to complex technologies of power that produce social relations (Bay 2011), can help us to understand our uncritical receipt and use of scripts by highlighting the work of neoliberalism on ourselves. Within this process, not only do we become neoliberal subjects, we then, in turn, transform our clients into participants of the neoliberal project (Macias 2015; Bay 2011). Related to this, Brookfield (2005, p. 170), in drawing on the work of Erich Fromm (1941), explains our participation in governmentality, when he refers to as the concept of "automation conformity", which he defines as "the process of social manipulation that results in the adult striving to be exactly the same as he or she imagines the majority to be." Rather than embracing professional discretion and autonomy "the individual attempt[s] to escape [alienation;] the burden of freedom and its attendant anxieties" (Brookfield 2005, p. 171). This leads to a "decline in originality of thought and decision [and] inevitably works to kill individual conscience" (Brookfield 2005, pp. 172–73); that is, a suppression of critical thinking.

The growing managerial practice of referring to predetermined scripts, rather than responding authentically as human beings in the moment (Ponnert and Svensson 2016, not only kills critical thinking, but deprofessionalises social work practice by reducing it to a technical activity (Morley and Dunstan 2013). Marcuse [1941] (Marcuse [1941] 1988) would refer to this logic as technical rationality or technocratic capitalism, and points to how adopting the script both disguises and exercises the use of authoritarian power (Morley et al. 2019b). The removal of humanity and critical analysis from social work practice is symptomatic of "a kind of thoughtlessness [or] an inability to think", which Giroux (2015, p. 11), in drawing on Arendt's concept of banality has suggested is the root form of totalitarianism.

Thoughtlessness aside, the notion that our interactions with clients can be objective and neutral is also problematic for critical theorists, who suggest the "pretence of objectivity" simply reproduces hegemonic assumptions (Gray 1995; Cowburn et al. 2000; Morley

et al. 2019b). If the role of social work simply becomes reinforcing neoliberal governmentality through following scripts and carrying out other technical activities through risk assessment, surveillance, case management and the imposition of behaviour modification strategies, then arguably technology in the form of robots, may do this more effectively and efficiently than humans. We therefore may find ourselves participating in the redundancy of a human social work workforce to make way for the more cost-effective, efficient and ostensibly objective robot social workers (Morley et al. 2019b).

12. Elucidating the Possibilities for Critical Reflection and Analysis to Assist Practitioners to Think and Act beyond the Constraints of Neoliberal Discourses

Despite our social and political conditioning in which we are procured into banality and performing the subsequent violence, Arendt was convinced that "individuals remain capable of ethical and political action" (Rae 2019, p. 128). This elucidates the importance of critical reflection to safeguard against thoughtlessness, conformity and banality, and demonstrates how the Arendtian lens, "invokes 'wonder' for the possibility of thinking" (Di Paolantonio 2019, p. 213).

Related to this, Brookfield (2005, p. 35) talks about the concept of "ideology critique" as an important part of a critical reflection process, which he says involves "people learn[ing] to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices." He directly relates this to the work of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" which is the insidious process of how dominant ideas that don't serve us, or the people we work with, come to be accepted by us as our own (Brookfield 2005; see also Garrett 2020).

A Marxist perspective (also adopted by Author 2 in his analysis) highlights the material disadvantage our clients' experience, and the role of bureaucratic welfare requirements that create difficulties for clients to access basic supplies. This could equally be theorised by Margalit, or Nancy Fraser to recognise how inequality and poverty are dominantly constructed as welfare dependence, resulting in need created by structural disadvantage being viewed as individual deficit (Garrett 2017; Holscher et al. 2020). According to Fraser (2009 cited in Holscher et al. 2020, p. 249), justice requires "parity of participation" in which social arrangements must enable all people to be recognised as having "equal moral worth" in order to participate. Hence denying clients a request to meet, due to judging this as a waste of time is an 'institutionalised obstacle' and an act of injustice that inhibits "some people participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser 2009; cited in Holscher et al. 2020, p. 249). These disparaging practices are reified by 'expert' medicalised and psychologised discourses that are increasingly invoked in relation to dependency and addiction (Fraser, cited in Garrett 2017). Here, Fraser's work gives insight into the clients' identities being constructed in terms of their mental health diagnoses, and their anxieties, in a way that invalidates their needs and concerns. Related to this, Ferguson (2017) has convincingly drawn on Marx to implicate the inequalities created by capitalism in producing mental distress, while Reimer (2014) has unearthed the ways that dominant discourses construct professionals with specialist knowledge to create hierarchical relations between service users and social workers in which social workers are accorded the power to manage service users (Reimer 2014).

In critically challenging the Marxian contributions to understanding inequality in the context of global capitalism today, the work of French economist Thomas Piketty (2014 cited in Mays 2020), is highly relevant in showing how the last 200+ years of wealth accumulation practices of the super rich have created—and continue to create—massive social and economic inequalities. This has implications for understanding not only the plight of social work clients, but the austere resourcing and systematic underfunding of our public services, including human service organisations (Mays 2020). Resources need not be scare and practitioners would not be so time-poor, if policy makers implemented inequality reducing mechanisms such as a progressive global wealth tax and other forms of state regulation over economies (Mays 2020). This would ensure people have access to the basic resources they need, and reclaim the purpose of human service organisations as advocates

for the rights and interests of people in need, rather than assessing them to ration limited resources. Critical analysis of the findings of the critical reflection research, therefore, reminds us that if these inequalities were addressed, many similar critical incidents that emerge in social work practice, would never occur in the first place.

13. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study clearly suggest that Fook (2016) model of critical reflection is effective in assisting practitioners to find creative strategies to resist the workings of neoliberalism on organisational practices and on ourselves. Consistent with a growing number of studies, the findings of this research support an emerging body of literature that details the many outcomes and benefits of critical reflection for social work (see for example Fook 2015; Fook et al. 2016). These include enabling practitioners to learn from their experience to improve practice and respond to changing managerial environments whilst keeping their values intact (Fook et al. 2016).

Other research using Fook's model (2016) argues that critical reflection can address the disparity and tension between ethical, socially just practice, and technical competence according to organisations (Morley et al. 2019a). Elsewhere, it is suggested Fook's model of critical reflection provides the intellectual spaces required for practitioners to think beyond dominant constructions of professional practice as defined by neoliberalism (Morley and Stenhouse 2020). It is also argued that Fook's critical reflection model has been used to expose oppositional and fatalistic thinking, and highlight the need for social workers "to act collectively in order to reclaim their own power rather than simply wait to respond reactively to the demands of the new social work regulator" (Cleary 2019, p. 2267). Other research similarly evidences that Fook's model of critical reflection "facilitates students' commitment to the values and principles of critical social work, and the ways this fosters resistance to the colonisation of social work by neoliberalism" (Morley and Macfarlane 2014, p. 337). Related to these studies, an earlier piece of research suggests using the same model notes that,

> . . . critical reflection enhances the emancipatory vision of social work by constructing alternative ways to think about and respond to the colonisation of social work and social work education, by neoliberal discourses, even within agency contexts that are dominated by neoliberal practices". (Morley and Dunstan 2013, p. 153)

Similarly, Fook (2016) model of critical reflection has been put forward as "a way of resisting neoliberalism, bolstering critical practices that are more aligned with protecting human rights, equity, democracy, social justice and other emancipatory goals of social work" (Morley and Macfarlane 2014, p. 338). Hence, the present study confirms the findings of this existing research.

In expanding the evidence base about the benefits and outcomes of critical reflection and therefore making an original contribution to knowledge, this article has developed Fook (2016) model by including an additional layer of theorising to the research process: critical analysis of the findings of the critical reflection using insights from relevant social theorists. The combination of critical reflection and critical analysis further elucidates the ubiquitous nature of neoliberalism in social work practice and organisations. In the context of social work practice, neoliberalism finds expression in establishment and competency-based approaches that emphasise the standardisation of professional practices (Macias 2015; Ponnert and Svensson 2016; Morley et al. 2019b). The findings suggest using supervision informed by critical reflection would be effective in supporting practitioners to resist neoliberalism so that practice remains ethical and centred on service users (O'Leary et al. 2013; Reimer 2014). Several critical scholars have also demonstrated social workers can and do use critical reflection and critical analysis as part of a strategic approach to work successfully with services users in an ethical manner (see for example, Morley et al. 2019a; Morley and Stenhouse 2020; Mueller and Morley 2020).

In addition to practice, this study also holds important implications for social work education. Not unlike human services organisations, social work education has been colonised by neoliberalism (Garrett 2010; Fenton 2014; Preston and Aslett 2014; Giroux 2014; Fraser and Taylor 2016; Swift et al. 2016; Morley et al. 2017; Ferguson 2017; Cleary 2019), which is now expected to cultivate social workers who are willing and able to adopt a standardised, cost-effective (and mostly individualised) approach to practice (see for example Macias 2015). To borrow insights from Fenton (2014, p. 331), "it seems that something needs to be done if social work education is to stop producing social workers who go along with neoliberal hegemony uncritically and unthinkingly." We agree, as Fenton (2014, p. 331) goes on to argue, that "social work education . . . needs to be braver in its explicit alignment with a radical social justice ideology with its central tenets of equality of distribution of resources as well as opportunity." She further notes that students who are unable to demonstrate this, "are actually missing the fundamentals of being a 'good enough' social worker, and should not qualify" (Fenton 2014, p. 331). Social work education should be an opportunity to disrupt the reproduction of hegemonic ideas (Morley et al. 2020). It is vital that social work students develop a comprehensive structural understanding of neoliberalism, the inequalities it causes, and the deleterious consequences it potentially holds for social work practice. Such analysis needs to be informed by critical theory capable of proposing emancipatory alternatives. It is also vital that students develop a strong capacity for critical self-reflection. This will enable them to recognise and resist their participation in governmentality, banality, automation conformity and technical rationality, to avoid simple collusion with hegemonic assumptions that result in social work practices that patholologise, harm and humiliate people seeking support. In addition, critical self-reflection is necessary, to maintain the faculties of critical thinking that enable work towards social justice and social change. Without this foundational knowledge, in Swift et al. (2016, p. 387) words, "social workers risk becoming complicit" (see also Preston and Aslett 2014; Morley 2016, p. 53; Morley et al. 2017; Morley 2020).

Collectively, the findings from Author 2's critical reflection on practice and Author 1's critically theorised analysis of the wider practice issues raised by the critical reflection, demonstrate the impacts and pervasiveness of neoliberal practices in social work. This study affirms the value of Fook (2016) model of critical reflection, and suggests that analysis of critically reflective research is enhanced by the explicit use of critical theory to contest the destructive operations of neoliberalism in organisations. This finding is significant since neoliberalism has permeated social work education and practice in a way that renders the espoused social justice values and mission of social work as almost unrecognisable in many organisational settings. Hence, engaging in both critical reflection and critically theorised social analysis, as presented in this paper, may therefore enhance more robust social work practice responses to neoliberalism, that are informed value-driven, client-centred and social change-oriented.

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