



Keynote

Business as Usual? Racial Equity, Managerialism, and Social Work

What is the “New Normal” in Social Work? Over the past several decades, the introduction of the business model (Managerialism) into human service organizations has led to dramatic changes that have restructured working conditions and service provision in ways that dramatically affect the capacity of human service workers and agencies to serve all clients. This understudied metric-driven approach has increased an emphasis on productivity, accountability, efficiency, and standardization, while downplaying or constraining the profession’s advocacy and social justice missions. Using an anonymous survey of 3000 NYC human service workers, we examined the impact of Managerialist practices on front-line social workers. A troubling trend emerged: workers in agencies with a high commitment to managerialism found it considerably more difficult to adhere to social work’s mission and fundamental values than those in low managerial agencies.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread protest against racial injustice exposed routinely ignored structural racism long-embedded in our social institutions. This reckoning led social workers to re-examine professional practices, organizational structures, and public policies through a critical, anti-racist lens. Applying a racial justice lens to our study of the impact of Managerialism in the human service workplace, we identified troubling evidence of systemic racism in leadership hierarchies, worker control/surveillance on the job, quality of the physical work environment, exposure to workplace violence, exclusion by micro-inequities, and agency commitment to social justice. Worker resistance, ethical dilemmas and well-being also varied by race and commitment to managerialism.

Social Work cannot adapt to the “New Normal” unless it names the problem, provides evidence, and corrects the combined adverse impacts of managerialism and structural racism on the health and well-being of social workers and human service organizations. We can --and must --rewrite the rules, so that they support mission driven working conditions and a more racially just profession.



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Mimi Abramovitz, MSW, DSW, the Bertha Capen Reynold Professor of Social Policy, Silberman School of Social Work, Hunter College and The CUNY Graduate Center is often introduced as a scholar and an activist. Using lens of race, class, and gender, she studies the welfare state, inequality, neoliberalism, activism, and the impact of public policy on human service workers and organizations. She currently co leads the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (Voting is Social Work)



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