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Social workers and the neoliberal values of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency: Results of a NZ study

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Abstract

New Zealand society has entrenched neoliberal messaging of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency over the past forty years. This article addresses a gap in knowledge about social worker political ideologies in New Zealand. It reports on the findings of a quantitative survey administered to New Zealand social workers. The aim of the survey was to identify dominant political ideologies held by social workers, measure a range of socially authoritarian and right-wing economic attitudes, and identify if these attitudes are consistent with their self-identified political ideology. Following analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics software, the results of the study found that most respondents positioned themselves as Liberal or Progressive yet held more right-wing attitudes towards personal responsibility and self-sufficiency than their political ideology might have predicted. The most significant finding is social worker age made more of a contribution than political ideology with respect to attitudes and beliefs around personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. Social workers under the age of fifty are more likely than social workers fifty years or older to be unwittingly reflecting neoliberal values of personal

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responsibility and self-sufficiency onto their clients, which is then likely to further marginalize their clients.

Keywords: activism; age; neoliberalism; othering; political ideologies; social work identity.

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Introduction

Neoliberalism's values prioritising individual responsibility, economic liberalism, and a minimal state are evident across many aspects of modern first world democracies, including social work organizations and social work practice. These influences include practical administrative impacts such as the significant amount of administrative paperwork and 'ticking boxes on screens' required of social workers (Brandt et al., 2020: 2035). These exist alongside other broader impacts which shape social work identity such as the tensions in identifying as a social work professional and yet becoming a street-level bureaucrat required to implement policies that conflict with social work values such as self-determination and advocacy (Trappenburg et al., 2020).

There are, to a very limited degree, studies about social worker political ideology (e.g. Rosenwald 2006, 2023). Yet there is very little research which has combined the impact of neoliberalism on social worker ideology and the consequences for social work practice. One exception is Fenton (2020), who studied social work students in the UK finding generational differences, where younger generations of students had internalized neoliberal messaging. This article builds on the work of Fenton (2020) to report on the findings of a survey of New Zealand (NZ) based registered social workers. This survey explored NZ social workers' self-reported political ideology and considered whether neoliberal messaging had unknowingly influenced their attitudes and beliefs around personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

The results detailed in this article demonstrate that NZ social workers generally hold left wing political beliefs (emphasizing social equality and egalitarianism), but there are generational differences in how these beliefs are articulated. The study consequently offers new insights on the extent to which social workers' neoliberal beliefs about socially authoritarian value systems (obeying social norms at the expense of freedom and autonomy) and right-wing economic attitudes (favouring tradition, individual freedom and minimal government intervention) aligned with their self-identified political ideology. These findings illustrate that neoliberalism has become normalized in society and that social workers, and

consequently social work practice, are now part of the normalized neoliberal NZ.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political ideology. As a political ideology, it is a packaging of values and beliefs about how society should function (Rosenwald 2023). Simply put, these varied consolidated sets of values and beliefs can be placed on a spectrum which can be separated into three political architypes: socialism, liberalism, and conservatism (Ostrowski 2023). These three architypes can then be divided into a myriad of political ideologies, though the more useful and accepted approach is to avoid overly complex and overlapping ideologies by dividing political thought into five sections on the political spectrum from the left of the spectrum to the right: Progressive, Liberal, Moderate, Conservative, and New Right. Generally, the more left the position is, the more communal and the more state involvement. As the spectrum moves to the right, more individualistic values dominate while at the same time having stronger authoritarianism over social issues.

Neoliberalism's core principles prioritize freedom, personal responsibility (accepting responsibility for one's actions), self-sufficiency (relying on one's self to meet personal needs), and the free market as the arena for equality of opportunity (Stanley-Clarke 2016; Heywood 2021). As inferred in its name, neoliberalism is an evolution of classical liberalism that started to gain popularity in the mid-twentieth century emanating from the Chicago School. The global economic turmoil of the 1970s resulted in neoliberalism becoming the dominant political ideology for many western countries in economic crisis.

With an increased focus on managerialism and risk minimization, neoliberalism's approach to addressing well-being within society reflects its core values with a rolling back of state structures to maximize individual responsibility, economic liberalism (often reflected in state austerity through cost cutting), and free market policies. It prioritizes paid work and regards any state intervention to support those unable to work as a short-term measure (Stanley-Clarke 2016; Heywood 2021). Neoliberalism can inform government policy through policies that focus on decreasing the role of the state, economic liberalism, and placing more focus on individual obligations (Stanley-Clarke 2016). It can also impact organizations where social workers work with key performance indicators, risk frameworks, and ideas about individual responsibility. It is the extent to which these core values and policy approaches influence social work practice that is the core focus of this article.

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Neoliberalism in NZ

Throughout most of the twentieth century, NZ's approach to welfare delivery reflected a welfare state built on an egalitarian foundation. This was seen as a common-sense solution to economic factors impacting on the individual (Wilson 2017). In response to the global pressures of the 1970s including the oil shock and the implementation of tariffs, NZ's welfare state was no longer sustainable. From 1984, the once common-sense approach was dismantled by figures from the political neoliberal 'extremist fringe' who embraced the new approach and its values have become part of the social and economic mainstream (Price 1997: 6). NZ now fits within a liberal welfare typology, with a focus on individual responsibility rather than the expectation of strong levels of state support (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Forty years of neoliberalization in NZ, specifically the targeting of welfare through neoliberal messaging (the other, personal responsibility, self-sufficiency), has increased public antipathy towards the poor (Humpage 2011, 2016). There is now a substantial proportion of the public identifying poverty as one of the most important issues for New Zealanders, though public discourse has framed this as the impoverished who are not deserving or truly needing welfare support (Beddoe and Keddell 2016; Crothers 2016). These attitudes result from a prioritization of self-interest and individual responsibility, 'workfare' government policies, and the 'responsibilities over rights' discussion (O'Brien 2013; Humpage 2017). These wider priorities have then set the context for public messaging about reducing benefits, increasing obligations for people on benefits, and sanctions for non-compliance. This messaging frames beneficiaries as having poor behaviour, and they are therefore cast as failures (O'Brien 2019). This is the context within which social workers practice.

Neoliberalization of practice

For many social workers (and an increasing number), neoliberalism is the only governing political ideology they have experienced. They are unaware and have difficulty in understanding the subversive messaging around individual responsibility (Beddoe and Keddell 2016). As a result, NZ social work students raised in the normative neoliberal period have internalized aspects of the neoliberal view towards individual responsibility and wider neoliberal values (Beddoe and Keddell 2016). This creates a situation where new social workers have difficulty understanding how social injustices arise from neoliberalism, meaning they struggle to engage in empathetic practice with their clients (Morley and Ablett 2017; Fenton 2018; Gair 2018; Brockmann and Garrett 2022). This is supported by the results of Fenton (2020) who found social work students born during or after 1995 in the UK (another neoliberal country) hold more right-wing views towards unemployed people, crime,

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and punishment. Furthermore, a substantial number of this generation of social workers are increasingly seeing people experiencing poverty as 'undeserving' even while maintaining supportive views regarding diversity and human rights (Fenton 2020, 2021). The internalization of neoliberal values extends to divergent views on social responsibility within social worker belief systems (Ringstad 2014), including those with conservative views more likely to assign individual blame to those in poverty and for limited welfare state support (Toft and Calhoun 2021).

Renau et al. (2023) identified the existence of a neoliberal blindness paradox among NZ social workers. This paradox is where social workers, who are aware of social injustices impacting clients and the need for structural change, instead focus on individual advocacy thereby perpetuating neoliberal values of individual responsibility and marginalizing clients. Indeed, the neoliberal blindness paradox calls into question the willingness of social workers to apply social justice knowledge and understanding into practice with their clients.

Cost constraints, managerialism, and the challenge to social work values

As well as creating wider social issues for social work, neoliberalism (having become the prevailing management approach) has fundamentally reshaped the social work environment, social work practice, and social work's prevailing management approach. Managerialism (the style of management demanded through neoliberal approaches) actively diminishes social worker experiences and knowledge through the pursuit of measurable actions or outcomes to achieve key performance indicators. The social work workplace, therefore, is now organized for social workers to demonstrate those actions and outcomes at the expense of social worker autonomy (Lavee and Strier 2018). These outcomes are individualized, with the requirement the budget holder be fiscally responsible to the agency's funding contract outcomes.

Most recently in NZ, another neoliberal layer has arisen from the government's quasi-austerity measures (in the name of economic rationalization). This approach has seen the state child protection agency, as the primary contractor of non-governmental social service providers, cut roughly 20 percent of the contracting budget (RNZ 2024). With the cancelation of 190 social service providers and the significant reduction of another 142 contracts, social service providers face significant uncertainty and challenges (Ingoe 2024). This quasi-austerity means that social service providers need to prioritize securing their contracts and maintaining fiscal sustainability rather than representing client needs (Mosley 2012, 2013). This approach reinforces a managerial approach with contracts undermining social service providers (and by extension social workers') ability to

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provide the necessary support and advocacy for their communities (Grey and Sedgwick 2015).

Social work resistance and adaptation to neoliberalism

Literature offers examples of social workers' challenge, resistance, protest, and adaptation to neoliberalism. In an ideal world, social workers have agential capabilities to resist neoliberal policy through discretion in their individual practice and in collective public protest (Moth et al., 2025). Essentially this offers the choice to participate in dismantling neoliberalism or be an accomplice in its entrenchment into social work (Garrett 2021).

Research (Hyslop 2018; Rogowski 2021) calls out the necessity to conscientize the social work foundations of human work, redemption, and the removal of structural barriers to remind social workers of their social justice focus and to challenge neoliberal discourse. To support this, there are frameworks linking social work practice wisdom to knowledge of structural and political issues (Garrett 2017, 2019). For example, Krumer-Nevo (2021) developed a 'poverty-aware social work paradigm' that argued social work should be based on a critical analysis of discourse, social structures, and ideology.

Social work education also can play a role in ensuring social work graduates know about the impacts of neoliberalism and are prepared for engaging and resisting neoliberal social work conditions (Hendrix et al., 2021). This should include teaching students frameworks to assist in analysing and deconstructing neoliberal social policy (Beddoe and Keddell 2016).

Overall, the literature highlights the impact of neoliberalism and its potential consequences for social work practice. NZ's neoliberal policies of the past four decades have strengthened the public's neoliberal views towards personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and the role of state welfare provision. Social workers now practice within this context. As the workforce ages, younger generations of social workers have grown up within this neoliberal society, and research suggests that this has resulted in an internalization of neoliberal values (Beddoe and Keddell 2016). The neoliberalization of social work workplaces through managerialism and the contracting system, further emphasizes neoliberal values. However, there is no available NZ evidence establishing the political ideology of social workers and whether they have internalized these neoliberal values. It is this gap this study seeks to fill.

Methods

The results presented here are from a wider mixed-methods monograph PhD study. The survey was employed to meet the first objective of the

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research, specifically, to identify dominant political ideologies held by NZ social workers, and whether their political ideology aligned with attitudes about personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. The survey was peer reviewed and checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor in February 2024. Data collection occurred between February and April 2024. Survey participants were volunteers recruited via the national social worker association who placed an advertisement on their website. Snowball recruitment was also utilized and involved the email distribution of a survey invitation through the authors' social work networks and through social media sites including LinkedIn and Facebook. Participants were required to be registered social workers practising in NZ with no other exclusion or inclusion criteria applied. The multiple recruitment pathways, even with the use of snowball recruitment, limits sampling bias (Morley et al., 2009; Geddes et al., 2018; Leighton et al., 2021). Survey participants gave informed consent after reviewing an information sheet setting out participant rights and other ethical considerations at the start of the survey.

The survey drew on a tool developed and validated by Fenton (2020) and Grasso et al. (2019) that measured socially authoritarian and right-wing economic attitudes. The tool was chosen due to the ready application in an NZ setting (given the similar neoliberal developments in each country). The current survey utilized (with minor contextual amendments) nine questions about attitudes around inequality and redistribution, attitudes about unemployed people, and authoritarian social attitudes (Table 1).

The survey also included a self-identifying question around political ideology, with the construction of the accompanying political ideology definitions drawn from the work of Stanley-Clarke (2016), who provided descriptions of political ideologies within a NZ context, and Rosenwald (2023), who provided

Table 1. Attitudes and beliefs survey subscales and individual questions.

Subscale	Individual question comprising subscale
Income and Redistribution subscale	Q1. What do you think about the income gap between the rich and the poor in Aotearoa New Zealand today?
	Q2. The government should redistribute from the better off to the less well off?
	Q3. The government should spend more money on the poor even if it leads to higher taxes.
Attitudes to Unemployed subscale	Q4. Opinions differ about the level of benefits for the unemployed. Which of these best reflects your opinion?
	Q5. Unemployed people could find a job if they wanted to.
	Q6. People should learn to stand on their own two feet.
Authoritarian Social Attitudes subscale	Q7. The death penalty is appropriate for some crimes.
	Q8. People who break the law should be given stronger sentences.
	Q9. Schools should teach children to obey authority.

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Table 2. List and description of political ideologies.

Political ideology	Explanation
Progressive	Strong desire for fundamental change in society by replacing oppressive institutions with more equitable ones
Liberal	Government is a safety net for protecting people's rights and for those who experience disempowerment and oppression
Moderate	Fundamentally satisfied with society but see room for planned and gradual improvement
Conservative	Concerned about scope of social change and favour a change to traditional values, with government policy upholding these values
New right	Prefer traditional values and believe government should 'get out of the way' and allow capitalism to shape a socially conservative society

analysis of political ideologies within a social work context. The literature notes that asking a simple question around a person's political ideology provides a reliable self-assessment of political ideology (Jost et al., 2009). The survey asked participants to select the option (presented in Table 2) indicating the political ideology that best reflected their values and beliefs when thinking about social issues.

Results

By the end of the survey period, data were collected from 131 participants (presented in Table 3), with 129 participants completing the survey (the remaining participants started the survey and completed the political ideology question but did not proceed into the questions about socially authoritarian and right-wing economic attitudes).

The responses were coded from 1 (high authoritarianism) to 5 (low authoritarianism) and then the survey scores were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. The mean scores as they relate to the individual survey questions are presented in Table 4.

The mean scores were then further analysed to consider age of participants and the self-identified political ideology of the participants and the relationship between these factors and social worker beliefs.

Political ideologies

A series of one-way between-groups analysis of variance tests ('ANOVA') were conducted to explore the impact of political ideology on the three subscales (presented in Table 5). The Inequality and Redistribution subscale, the Attitudes to Unemployed subscale, and the Authoritarian Social Attitudes subscale found a statistically significant difference at the $P < .05$ level. This result means political ideology does influence how people

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Table 3. Participant demographics and political ideology of participants.

	N	Percentage
Age range[a]		
18–23 years	0	0
24–49 years	72	55
50+ years	59	45
Gender		
Female	107	82
Male	23	18
Other	1	1
Ethnicity[b]		
Māori	27	21
Pasifika	8	6
NZE	102	78
Other	21	16
Social work experience		
0–5 years	25	19
6–10 years	21	16
11–20 years	31	24
21+ years	54	41
Political ideology		
Progressive	84	64
Liberal	27	21
Moderate	15	11
Conservative	3	2
New Right	2	2

[a]With the most severe NZ neoliberal reforms occurring in the late 1980s and 1990s, those aged under fifty years had not reached adulthood before these reforms started. There may be some cross-over periods; however, these age groups largely are reasonable generational dividing points, with those fifty and over likely to have reached adulthood before or just at the start of these reforms. This follows similar considerations by Fenton (2020).

[b]Multiple ethnicities can be selected per individual. NZ is a multicultural country with most being New Zealanders of European ancestry (NZE). Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand, and Pasifika refers to the peoples of Pacific Islands ethnicities who reside in New Zealand. Social workers in NZ have a regulatory requirement to ensure their practice is culturally responsive to these indigenous peoples.

position themselves in these measures, with a less than 5 percent probability that the differences are by chance.

The individual questions which comprise the Attitudes to Unemployed People subscale were analysed to explore the extent that the neoliberal values of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency have influenced social workers of various ideological standing (presented in Table 6). An ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of ideology on the three individual subscale questions. For attitudes about unemployment benefits levels (question four) and attitudes about unemployed people (question five), there was a statistically significant difference at the $P < .05$ level in survey scores for the ideology groups. No significant difference between political ideologies was found between the scores for the issue of self-sufficiency (question six). The results show that political ideology matters

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Table 4. Socially authoritarian and right-wing economic attitudes subscales.

Income and Redistribution subscale				
	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Total subscale
Mean	5	3.91	4.01	4.30
Std. deviation	0	1.06	0.98	0.62
Attitudes to Unemployed subscale				
	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Total subscale
Mean	3.87	3.44	2.97	3.43
Std. deviation	0.87	0.88	0.97	0.73
Authoritarian Social Attitudes subscale				
	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9	Total subscale
Mean	4.4	3.53	3.7	3.88
Std. deviation	0.94	1.15	0.97	0.74

Table 5. Political ideology contribution across subscales.

	Inequality and Redistribution*		Attitudes to Unemployed**		Authoritarian Social Attitudes***	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
New Right, $n = 2$	3.67	0.94	2.83	0.24	2.17	0.24
Conservative, $n = 3$	3.89	0.51	3.22	0.69	3.56	0.51
Moderate, $n = 14$	3.73	0.51	3.00	0.60	3.38	0.61
Liberal, $n = 26$	4.13	0.70	3.19	0.74	3.94	0.65
Progressive, $n = 84$	4.48	0.53	3.60	0.70	3.99	0.72

*F (4, 124) = 7.24, $P < .001$.
**F (4, 124) = 3.72, $P = .007$.
***F (4, 124) = 5.66, $P < .001$.

for benefit levels and unemployed people, with a less than a 5 percent probability the results are by chance. However, the result for self-sufficiency (where there was no statistically significant difference) suggests this might be a shared belief across participants, regardless of political ideology.

Age

The differences between the two age groups and the three subscales were analysed using independent-sample *t*-tests to compare the attitudes and beliefs of the age of social workers who grew up under normalized neoliberalism (aged forty-nine years and under) and those fifty years of age and

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Table 6. Individual questions for attitudes to unemployed subscale.

	Question 4*		Question 5**		Question 6	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
New Right, $n=2$	3.00	1.41	3.00	1.41	2.50	0.70
Conservative, $n=3$	4.00	0.00	3.33	1.16	2.33	1.53
Moderate, $n=14$	3.50	1.09	2.93	0.92	2.57	0.51
Liberal, $n=26$	3.46	0.81	3.19	0.98	2.92	0.94
Progressive, $n=84$	4.08	0.78	3.62	0.79	3.08	1.05

*F (4, 123) = 2.91, $P=.003$.
**F (4, 124) = 2.84, $P=.027$.

Table 7. Age differences as a contributor to attitudes and beliefs.

	24–49 years, $n=70$		50+ years, $n=59$	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Inequality and Redistribution*	4.18	0.62	4.45	0.6
Attitudes to Unemployed**	3.25	0.67	3.63	0.74
Q4: Benefit levels	3.74	0.93	4.03	0.77
Q5: Unemployed****	3.23	0.82	3.69	0.89
Q6: Own two feet*****	2.78	0.92	3.19	1.04
Authoritarian Social Attitudes***	3.68	0.79	4.11	0.6

*t (127) = −2.52, $P=.013$, two-tailed.
**t (127) = −3.09, $P=.002$, two-tailed.
***t (127) = −3.48, $P<.001$, two-tailed.
****t (127) = −3.09, $P=.002$, two-tailed.
*****t (126) = −2.33, $P=.022$, two-tailed.

older—who had already reached adulthood before or during the period of normative neoliberalism (presented in Table 7). A significant difference was found with the Inequality and Redistribution subscale, with those aged forty-nine years and under leaning slightly more towards right-wing attitudes than those fifty years and older. Those aged forty-nine years and under were significantly more right-wing in Attitudes to Unemployed People subscale than their social worker colleagues aged fifty years and older. With respect to the Authoritarian Social Attitudes subscale, those aged forty-nine years and under were significantly more authoritarian than the fifty years and older group.

The questions which comprise the Attitudes to Unemployed People subscale were analysed given the specific interest of this research (presented in Table 7). The analysis revealed there was no significant difference found for attitudes towards the unemployment benefit levels. There was a significant difference regarding the attitudes towards personal responsibility (unemployed people could find a job if they wanted to) between those

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aged forty-nine years and under and those fifty years and older. Those aged forty-nine years and under were significantly more right-wing in their attitudes about self-sufficiency (people should learn to stand on their own two feet) than those fifty years of age and older.

Age and political ideology

Given the interesting results about political ideology and age as distinct factors, the attitudes to unemployed subscale individual questions were further analysed by conducting standard multiple linear regression to further explore the relationship between age and political ideology and social worker attitudes and beliefs in this area (presented in Table 8).

While the R squared values across the three tests are relatively weak, this is still acceptable within social science research and is not necessarily a concern (Ozili 2023). Further, the main objective of the test was to explore the relationship between political ideology and age, rather than prediction; therefore, the R squared values are not overly important given the *P*-values across the three questions show statistical significance (Frost, 2020).

For attitudes and beliefs regarding benefit levels, the overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that political ideology made a statistically unique contribution to social worker attitudes and beliefs regarding benefit levels, but age did not make a significant unique contribution to the attitudes regarding benefit levels. For attitudes and beliefs regarding personal responsibility (question five), the overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that age and political ideology made a statistically unique contribution to the relationship between social worker attitudes and beliefs regarding personal responsibility; however, age had more influence than ideology. For attitudes and beliefs regarding self-sufficiency (question six), the overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that age and political ideology made a statistically

Table 8. The contribution of age and political ideology to attitudes and beliefs to unemployed subscale.

	Age			Political ideology		
Individual question	β	*P*-value	SD	β	*P*-value	SD
Question 4*	0.254	.003	0.083	0.250	.095	0.149
Question 5**	0.43	.004	0.148	0.226	.007	0.083
Question 6***	0.373	.033	0.172	0.195	.045	0.096

*$R^2 = 0.096$, $F(2, 125) = 6.629$, $P = .002$.
**$R^2 = 0.122$, $F(2, 126) = 8.744$, $P < .001$.
***$R^2 = 0.072$, $F(2, 125) = 4.830$, $P = .01$.

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unique contribution to social worker attitudes and beliefs regarding self-sufficiency; however, age had more influence than ideology.

Left-wing political ideology of social workers

This survey explored NZ social workers' self-reported political ideology and considered whether neoliberal messaging had influenced their attitudes and beliefs around self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. It offers a theoretical contribution in terms of how neoliberal values impact social work practice. Further, the results address the lack of available research about the political ideology of social workers working in NZ. This is especially important given that social work is a progressive socialist endeavour. It is crucial, therefore, to understand how social workers preference practice approaches to achieve those goals (Duarte 2017).

This study offers an initial assessment of the political ideology of NZ social workers, with 85 percent of social workers identified as having left-wing political ideologies. The results are similar to the results of international research (Rosenwald 2006; Flaherty et al., 2013; Mizrahi and Dodd 2013; Ringstad 2014; Toft and Calhoun 2021) showing most social workers identify with left-wing political ideology. With respect to this study, of the 85 percent identifying as holding left-wing positions, most social workers identified as very liberal (64 percent identifying as Progressive) rather than moderately liberal (21 percent as Liberal). This overall composition is not surprising considering social workers and social work students (both undergraduates and postgraduates) are more likely to hold liberal ideologies than the public, and more likely to be more liberal than other helping professions (Rosenwald 2023).

Consideration was also given to the possibility of social desirability bias. Fenton (2018) and Flaherty et al. (2013) suggest that social workers could be identifying as Liberal or Progressive because of their perception these ideologies are the appropriate response for a social worker working within a left-wing profession. However, that is unlikely in this situation considering the overwhelming number of social workers who identified as left-wing yet held socially liberal attitudes and beliefs in certain areas with more conservative attitudes and beliefs in other areas.

What is surprising is that social workers who identified as Progressive had attitudes and beliefs more aligned to a moderate position with respect to personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, those who identify themselves as Liberal likely held moderate positions around personal responsibility but had attitudes and beliefs more aligned to a conservative position around self-sufficiency. This finding is consistent with the research of Skilling (2021) who found that everyday citizens were overall quite dissatisfied with neoliberalism but still believed that there needed to be individual responsibility for resolving personal circumstances. Despite initial social work training and then ongoing professional development,

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the findings reported here suggest that social workers may not be in a better position to understand structural injustices than everyday NZ citizens. This highlights the importance of social work education having increased focus on the analysis and deconstruction of neoliberal social policies as suggested by Beddoe and Keddell (2016).

The influence of age on personal responsibility and self-sufficiency

The second key finding is that social worker age makes a greater contribution than self-identified political ideology with two key areas: social workers' attitudes towards personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. Those under the age of fifty held moderate views towards personal responsibility, whereas those fifty years of age and older held moderate-liberal views. With respect to self-sufficiency, those under the age of fifty held conservative views and those fifty years of age and older represented moderate attitudes and beliefs. This finding supports other research findings (Marston and McDonald 2012; Fenton 2018; Gair 2018; Fenton 2020; Brockmann and Garrett 2022) that many social workers have grown up under neoliberalism as a governing ideology and have difficulty in understanding its subversive narratives around individual responsibility. This finding is likely to be the result of the neoliberalization of NZ society over the last forty years. The literature notes that social workers are more likely to practice their social work based on prevailing societal values and norms (Castillo and Becerra 2012; Davidson et al., 2017). NZ society has experienced a significant increase in public attitudes viewing welfare recipients' personal inadequacies as a cause of their circumstances and therefore the view that they are less deserving of support than the general public (Humpage 2011, 2016). While neoliberalism has caused significant dissatisfaction among the public, they do value individual responsibility as the right approach to deal with personal circumstances; aligned with a view that inequality is a product of individual behaviour (poor choices, bad attitudes, and a lack of self-belief) rather than caused by structural injustices (Skilling 2021).

Grasso et al. (2019) describe the attitudinal changes as a trickle-down theory of social change within a normative and normalized period of neoliberalism, where neoliberal values have been ingrained in people who then became adults during the first round of neoliberal reforms of the late 1980s (the phase of normative neoliberalism) and for those coming of age during the consolidation of neoliberalism ten to fifteen years later in the early 2000s (the period of normalized neoliberalism). This generational difference is further supported by the work of Fenton (2020) who found social work students born from 1995 onwards are more likely to hold right-wing views regarding crime, punishment, and unemployed people and that people in poverty are increasingly being seen as undeserving (Fenton 2020, 2021). Observations of NZ social work classrooms have also

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seen an increase in social work students with internalized neoliberal values including individual responsibilities (Beddoe and Keddell 2016).

At an early point in the normalized phase of neoliberalism, 60 percent of people thought it was the responsibility of the government to provide a job for anyone who wanted one, down from 86 percent during the normative phase. Similarly, blaming individuals for their circumstances (e.g. impoverishment) had risen from 38 percent in 1989 to 73 percent in 2004, and the belief that laziness was the primary cause of people experiencing poverty had also almost doubled during that time (Humpage 2011). In this context, it is not surprising that social workers reaching adulthood during the normalized period of neoliberalism (those aged forty-nine years and under) have internalized these neoliberal messages notwithstanding their social work education to a greater degree than those aged fifty and over.

There are other factors likely to shape social workers' beliefs, including New Public Management practices in the social service sector, state control of social work identity, the skills-based focus of university degrees, and the professionalization of social work. These factors are, to some extent, explored in the wider mixed-methods monograph PhD study from which these results derive. However, there are opportunities for hypothesis-driven research to further explore the possible influence of these factors.

Implications for social workers

This combination of findings has important implications for social work and social workers given the indication that social workers across the political spectrum are likely to blame impoverished clients for their situation. Social workers largely view their political ideology as removed from their practice, though those who identify within the left-wing political ideologies are more likely to apply their attitudes and beliefs in their practice than those with right-wing positions (Rosenwald and Hyde 2006). Importantly, even if social workers believe they are engaging in a social justice approach, without a critical understanding of ideology, social workers will be entrenching neoliberalism into their practice and onto their clients (Brockmann and Garrett 2022). Alongside this, social workers with conservative views are more likely to blame those in poverty for their circumstances (Toft and Calhoun 2021). The critical nature of those findings is elevated when considering other writers (e.g. Beddoe and Keddell 2016; Rosenwald 2023) who note that ethically sound practice is premised on the extent to which the social worker is aware of their political ideology and how it influences their practice. There are generational differences with age having a stronger influence than political ideology about personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. As the workforce ages and new generations of social workers enter the profession, there are implications for how

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social worker practice will inadvertently place neoliberal expectations onto clients.

NZ law requires social workers to register with the Social Workers Registration Board and evidence certain core competence standards. Part of these competencies requires social workers to understand social and economic injustice and the mechanisms of oppression and to critically analyse the systems and structures which impact on people and society (SWRB 2024). The findings of this study raise serious concern about the ability of social workers to have a sufficient understanding to meet their registration requirements. If social work, as articulated in NZ registration competencies, is in part about achieving social justice, then a social worker's belief system will influence how they achieve the associated goals. In this regard, the political ideology of social workers is a critical aspect of social worker identity. These findings provide a starting point for understanding the political ideology of social workers in NZ. This study has shown that it is likely that social workers believe they hold left-wing ideologies and may therefore unwittingly reinforce neoliberal messages onto their clients. This is an important issue for future research, though these findings do provide further support to earlier research (Renau et al., 2023) that identified this as a key contributor to the neoliberal blindness paradox.

The prevalence of neoliberal values has been observed in social work classrooms (Beddoe and Keddell 2016; Fenton 2020). This apparent ideological shift towards individualism in social workers, unwittingly from the bottom up (or from the outside in), is a challenge to social work goals of social justice and social change. It is, therefore, at this point, that social work education could step in to address the internalization of neoliberal values by social workers. Strengthening social policy as part of the social work curriculum and growing critical thinking with respect to neoliberalism are baseline requirements in this regard. The anti-oppressive goals of social work require a critique of the entrenched neoliberal hegemony over society and the profession alongside the support for social work agency to disrupt this neoliberal hegemony. There should be serious concerns for clients within this neoliberal storm, with increasing numbers of social workers having shallow understanding of social injustice arising from neoliberalism and lacking empathetic responses for their clients (Fenton 2018; Gair 2018). More concerningly clients are also adopting neoliberal messaging to present as worthy of support, in turn individualizing their role around their needs and deprioritizing structural concerns (Woolford and Nelund 2013). There should be pragmatic expectations about the agential ability of social workers to challenge these neoliberal realities (Marston and McDonald 2012; Sinai-Glazer and Krumer-Nevo 2023). Conservative and incremental challenges may be the most appropriate form of agency (Rosenwald 2023); however, social workers cannot do this alone. Social workers need to be supported by their education providers

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bringing forth critical frameworks for the analysis and deconstruction of neoliberal policies (Beddoe and Keddell 2016) with the leadership of social work bodies to redirect social work to its humanist foundations (Hyslop 2018). The choice is stark; either challenge neoliberalism or be an accomplice to it (Garrett 2021).

Limitations

The research was limited in several ways. The sample is a reasonable size, though when broken down into political ideology groups the sample sizes are small. The findings are therefore not representative of the total NZ social worker population and therefore have limited generalizability (Patten and Newhart 2018). We also note that we have assumed participants under the age of fifty years will have grown up in a neoliberal environment, yet that may not be the case if participants had immigrated to NZ (though the literature notes neoliberalism is a widespread hegemonic force with many countries mirroring NZ's experience). The recruitment of respondents was opportunistic in nature and therefore not representative of the views of all NZ social workers (Patten and Newhart 2018). The respondents were likely to have an interest in the subject matter, which suggests that the respondents may have stronger beliefs and attitudes to the subject matter than social workers who did not complete the survey, or a social desirability bias (Durmaz et al., 2020) to provide 'correct' answers may have misrepresented their ideological positioning due to fear of discrimination. As noted by Jost et al. (2009), a simple question about political ideology can provide a reliable self-identification; however, the reliance of a single direct question (rather than a detailed multiple question set) also raises the possibility of social desirability bias. Sampling bias is also a possibility, leading to an unrepresentative sample selection; however, the multiple recruitment pathways mitigate against this (Patten and Newhart 2018). Finally, the statistical testing with regards to the R squared values for the relationship between age, political ideology, and personal responsibility and self-sufficiency is relatively weak. That noted, this is common in social research, and the purpose of that test is to explore rather than predict the relationship between the variables. Furthermore, the *P*-values are of statistical significance (Ozili 2023).

However, the results are a valuable contribution to an area of importance that has not been subject to research in NZ. More research is needed, including qualitative approaches, to better understand the extent to which social workers growing up in a normalized neoliberal society have right-wing views towards personal responsibility and self-sufficiency all the while holding self-perceived left-wing political ideologies and the impact on social work practice.

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Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to determine the political ideology of social workers in NZ and whether neoliberalism had influenced social worker attitudes and beliefs which may contradict their self-identified political ideological positioning. NZ society has moved from believing in a common good that binds society, to one where the public view personal responsibility and self-sufficiency as worthy traits. Within this changing society, an increasing plurality (if not a majority) of social workers have been raised in a normalized neoliberal society. This study has found social workers are likely to position themselves within the left of the political spectrum but hold conservative or moderate attitudes and beliefs with respect to personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. The second major finding was that social workers who came of age during the normalized neoliberal phase lean more towards right-wing views than their older colleagues with respect to these two key areas of neoliberalism. With research (Rosenwald and Hyde 2006) finding that social workers holding left-wing ideologies are more likely to allow their beliefs and attitudes to shape their practice, these findings suggest that they are likely to unwittingly push neoliberal values of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency onto their clients which then can contribute to the othering or marginalization of clients. These insights have implications for the role of social work education and can also inform professional development priorities for social work registration.

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