The tension between managerial and critical professional discourses in social work

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Abstract

• Summary: While managerialism is widely criticized for its deskilling effect on professional discourses, the evaluation of the power relations between managerialism and the critical professionalism that opposes it has not yet been sufficiently developed. To enable the assessment of fluctuations in these power relations, this study used in-depth interviews with 14 street-level social workers to examine the encounter between these discursive standpoints in the context of a specific case of an administrative request for critical professional programs to be implemented in the field.

• Findings: The findings highlight the operation of recognition as a salient parameter of discursive power positions. We address three aspects of recognition—discursive, interpersonal, and institutional—and demonstrate the existence of a struggle over the acceptable professional standpoint in the institutionalized public field of social work.

• Applications: Attention should be given to the different dimensions of recognition in order to enable the implementation of critical practice in the public field of social work. These dimensions can be addressed through broad training of various players in the field and the institutional backing of critical practice requirements.

Keywords

Social work, critical social work, managerialism, social policy, poverty, discourse analysis
Introduction

Neoliberal social policy, manifested in the form of a managerialist standpoint (Pavolini & Klenk, 2015), has repeatedly been associated with the deprofessionalization of social work (Noble & Henrickson, 2011; Rogowski, 2011; Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019). For the most part, the literature presents the encounter between managerialism and professionalism as the subjugation of previously predominant professional discourses (Evetts, 2009). An alternative stream of literature proposes a hybrid encounter of mutuality and integration, combining cost–benefit principles with professional ones (Noordegraaf, 2007). Within these existing frameworks, local configurations that allow these opposing discourses to gain legitimacy and positions of power in the field are understudied. Such legitimacy-gaining processes are of particular importance in investigating the possibility of critical professional disciplines such as critical social work becoming accepted policy for practice under the managerialist orientation currently dominant in the public services (Novotná, 2014; Payne, 2014; Wallace & Pease, 2011).

It is important to make clear the distinction between conservative and critical professionalism in social work. Conservative social work takes an othering and distancing position that sees service users as objects to be corrected (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). In contradistinction, critical social work translates the critical commitment to social justice to formulate the basic logic and practice of the profession (Boone et al., 2019; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Furthermore, critical social work advocates standing by service users in their struggle against their unjust life circumstances (Fook, 2016). Critical professionalism poses a unique challenge for managerialism in the institutional context of public services. Beyond its budgeting demands, it seeks to formulate a distinctive relationship between the service—which represents the state—and marginalized people, highlighting the state’s responsibilities to care for and support marginalized populations. Under the dominance of managerialism, this critical standpoint is rare (Rogowski, 2011).

In Israel, an opportunity to examine the direct discursive struggle between critical professionalism and managerialism was recently created, as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services invited proponents of the critical discourse of poverty-aware social work (Krumer-Nevo, 2016) to design pilot programs for working with families living in poverty (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2015). Here, we use this opportunity to analyze the power relations between these opposing discourses by analyzing street-level policy storylines (Carey & Foster, 2013). Through the lens of the parameter of recognition, we offer a detailed description and examination of the way in which these storylines construct their rationality. We begin by reviewing research on the encounter between managerialism and professional discourse in social work.

The encounter between managerial and professional discourses in social work

The literature regarding the governmentality of managerialism in the public sphere presents the managerial discourse as having a sweeping effect on the conduct of
public services (Pavolini & Klenk, 2015; Sowa et al., 2018), the professions involved in it (Evetts, 2009; Rogowski, 2011), and the relationships between states and citizens (Schram, 2018). We begin by describing the managerial discourse and the professional discourse of social work, and then illustrate the encounter between them.

Managerialism and New Public Management

Many scholars describe managerialism as an expression of neoliberal thought (Evetts, 2009; Wallace & Pease, 2011), which advocates a commitment to reduce public spending and government intervention in the market and in citizens’ lives (Pavolini & Klenk, 2015). Managerialism is based on the idea that public services should be managed in accordance with economic logic (Clarke & Newman, 1997). One of the key ways in which managerialism is translated into practice is through New Public Management (Hood, 1991), which emphasizes management methods from the business sector, clear parameters for professional conduct, competition as a basic dynamic for action, and entrepreneurial thinking as a fundamental value (Aucoin, 1990; Pavolini & Klenk, 2015). When adopted into welfare ministries, New Public Management encounters professional discourses and has significant influence over their practice and rationality (Rogowski, 2011; Sowa et al., 2018).

Professional discourses in social work

Social work is a multifaceted profession that demonstrates both a conservative line of thought and an opposing critical line (Payne, 2014). The conservative discourse of social work is characterized by a tendency to reduce structural social problems to personal problems of individuals, emphasizing people’s sole responsibility for their distress (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010). The guiding principle of the conservative discourse is that the social order must be accepted as normative and appropriate, and thus the basis of professional action is the notion that people must adapt to the social order (Cloward & Piven, 1975). Regarding the professional perception and understanding of people living in poverty, the literature describes conservative thought as based on the concept of the “culture of poverty” (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1796), blaming people living in poverty for their suffering and assuming that personal flaws and pathologies produce it (O’Connor, 2001).

Critical social work is a paradigm that criticizes conservative professionalism and has developed extensively in the last three decades (Fook, 2016). It includes several streams, among them feminist (Dominelli, 2002) and anti-oppressive social work (Strier & Binyamin, 2010). The basic principles of critical social work provide a structural interpretation of social distress that opposes the intrapsychic interpretation attributed to conservative approaches and seeks to establish a close and hierarchy-challenging relationship between social workers and service users (Fook, 2016). Poverty-aware social work, which forms the basis of the newly designed welfare programs at the Ministry and created the encounter that we set out to
analyze here, is based on such a critical structural interpretation of poverty. The Poverty-Aware Paradigm articulates principled solidarity of “standing by” people living in poverty in their struggle (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1803) as a basic ethical position of practice (Timor-Shlevin & Krumer-Nevo, 2016). In what follows, we unfold our understanding of the encounter between managerialism and the Poverty-Aware Paradigm as opposing discourses.

Contesting storylines

Managerialism and critical professionalism represent contesting standpoints that are struggling over the accepted practice of social workers. For the most part, the literature describes the power relations between managerialism and professional discourses as hierarchical and hegemonic, reflecting the dominance of the managerial discourse (Evetts, 2009; Novotná, 2014; Schram, 2018; Sowa et al., 2018). From a critical perspective, managerialism is criticized for its deskilling and flattening impact on social work practice, professional work, time management, and decision making (Noble & Henrickson, 2011; Rogowski, 2011; Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019). For example, there is criticism regarding the growing investment of social workers’ time in paperwork and bureaucratic tasks at the expense of working directly with service users (Jones, 2001). Brodkin (2011) shows how, under managerial pressure to reduce expenses, social workers have developed strategies such as rapid intervention, taking shortcuts in complex processes, and ritualization.

Under managerialist pressures, the professional standpoint of social work is changing (Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019). This transformation is due in particular to the prioritization of clinical work, the refusal to engage with exclusions created by the structural context, such as deteriorating housing policies, and objections to the critical practice of standing by service users in an ongoing, intensive manner (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). In contrast, managerial prerogatives, such as cost–benefit calculations, are gaining strength (Rogowski, 2011). Evetts (2009) identified this as the transition of occupational professionalism, which is based on professional logic, to organizational professionalism, which is based on economic logic.

In light of this critical analysis of managerialism, some scholars seek to go beyond the conceptualization of struggle and control to explore possibilities of connection and cross-fertilization (Hendrikx & van Gestel, 2017; Noordegraaf, 2007). They see the neoliberal context as presenting an opportunity to create integrated professionalism that combines professional logic and current managerial principles (Liljegren, 2012). These scholars argue that professionalism today cannot exist without the effects of managerialism and must comply with them to thrive (Noordegraaf, 2015). In other words, in order to endure in the contemporary social field, professions need to develop a more pragmatic professionalism that combines professional and managerial discourses in a focused and adaptive manner (Liljegren, 2012).
Under the prevailing circumstances, in which the perspectives of professionalism and managerialism stand in opposition to one another, critical social work is struggling for recognition as a policy and practice informed by social justice (Fook, 2016). This struggle involves an effort to shape the institutional public welfare system. In the next section, we address the need for a more nuanced analysis of the discursive encounter between the managerialist and critical standpoints, based on the parameter of recognition.

Analyzing professional discursive struggles

In his approach to the analysis of discursive interaction, Hajer (1993, 1995) mainly addresses how rationality is constructed in the institutional field, that is how the marking of specific outcomes and measurements as rational signifies their discursive power position. For example, the expectation that institutions will deliver outcomes utilizing measures such as the reduction of expenses (Brodkin, 2011; Evetts, 2009) reflects the fundamental, hegemonic discursive stance of managerialism. In cases where critical professional practices are introduced into the public welfare system, a duality is created. On the one hand, proponents of critical practice are allowed some liberty in introducing critical rationality and practical guidelines, while, on the other, they are exposed to the pressures of street-level routines and the managerialist views that accompany them.

Thus, in order to examine the power struggle between managerialism and critical professionalism, a more implicit, interpersonal parameter is required. According to Dahl (2009), such a parameter may be found in the function of recognition. In his analysis of discourse interaction, Hajer (1993, 1995) emphasizes that the encounter shapes the recognition and acceptance of a specific storyline as rational. This emphasis is consistent with previous cases cited in the literature that demonstrate how recognition and denial of recognition serve as powerful tools for generating power in the field (Benjamin, 2016; Dahl, 2009).

Theoretical framework: Recognition as an indicator of discursive power

Nancy Fraser (2003) introduces a model for social justice that consists of three dimensions—distribution, representation, and recognition—that are used to examine the extent to which a person participates in or is excluded from social life. Recognition has been described by scholars as an essential human need that provides people with a fundamental experience of belonging (Honneth, 1995; Houston, 2016; Taylor, 1992). Fraser emphasizes the institutional and organizational characteristics that produce and embody recognition, noting that the ability of institutional actors in the field to mark professionals as other, inferior, or invisible (Honneth, 1995) draws its power from social and institutional structures (Dahl, 2009; Fraser, 2003, 2008). Applying Fraser’s emphasis on recognition as based on institutional forces that allow participation and inclusion (Fraser, 2003),
we see recognition as a crucial indicator of processes that occur within specific institutional spaces.

More specifically, given the fact that it is grounded in institutional contexts, recognition may involve rhetorical acts of denial of personal and professional respect of those who will not succumb to what is considered the rational storyline. Hence, the power of such rhetorical acts is activated in the encounters between the critical and managerial discourses that take place at defining moments in decision-making processes. For example, Benjamin (2016) shows how, in budgeting processes, the respect professionals receive from senior managerial actors is generous until the final stages of the process. At the crucial stage of actual budgeting, the voice of the professionals is silenced and marked as irrational, making it impossible for them to contribute to the decisions being made. In other words, professionals’ discretion—their symbolic power in defining expenses, outcomes, and measurements—is erased (Bourdieu, 1989).

Despite the existence of a vast body of literature on the impact of managerialism on the professional field, the detailed examination of the specific circumstances that allow managerial and critical discourses to gain positions of power and legitimacy is still in its infancy (Sowa et al., 2018; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Most of the literature examines the power relations between managerialism and opposing professional discourses in a general manner, and due to the hegemonic influence of managerialism in the public welfare sphere, institutionalized encounters of these opposing discourses are rare (Payne, 2014). Thus, in the absence of a detailed examination of the specific power relations between managerialism and critical professionalism, it remains difficult to conceptualize potential shifts in these relations. Here, we examine the affinity of the institutional field for managerialism in the context of the threat to the managerial discourse posed by new critical programs. Building on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse (Foucault, 1972), this study proposes that the power relations between these opposing discourses are not merely forms of speech, but actually complex sets of premises, categories, classifications, and practices. Their interaction, as Hajer (1995) suggests, is a struggle over the rational storyline of professionalization, namely the practice that would seem rational in a specific institutional context. Our approach suggests that the struggle over the professional rationale takes place through recognition mechanisms, reproducing the power position of the managerial rationale.

The research context

We examined the power relations between these discourses in the context of the Israeli public welfare system. Israeli social work was largely founded based on the conservative rationale (Makaros & Weiss-Gal, 2014). Nevertheless, as in the UK (Rogowski, 2011) and other countries (Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019), over the last three decades managerialist principles, primarily cost reduction, have predominated in the management and design of social services as the neoliberal approach has become the leading normative voice on social issues (Benjamin,
2016), Israel’s high poverty rates (e.g. 18.4% among families, 29.6% among children in 2017 (National Insurance Institute of Israel, 2018)) have triggered public criticism. In response, the Ministry declared that the Poverty-Aware Paradigm could provide a solution and requested the development and implementation of new programs for working with people living in poverty. These programs were developed using the poverty-aware principles of critical professionalism (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2019). The act of inviting critical practices into the social services created the opportunity to investigate the process of implementing the poverty-aware programs as a case that clearly demonstrates the contesting storylines of managerialism and critical professionalism. In this context, we posed the following research questions: 1. How do social workers experience the tension between managerialism and critical professional discourse in the public welfare system? and 2. What can be learned from these experiences about the power relations between managerialism and critical professional discourse?

**Study design**

For the purpose of inductively studying the institutionalized discursive power relations created in the encounter between managerialism and the Poverty-Aware Paradigm, we followed the discursive footsteps of the institutionalized professional struggle over the rational storyline (Hajer, 1995). To this end, we used the qualitative phenomenological approach, which is suitable for extracting first-hand experiences (Van Manen, 1984). Furthermore, in order to address institutionalized power dynamics, we constructed the interview guide and analyzed the research materials in light of the institutional research design offered by DeVault (2006) and Smith (2005). This approach seeks to reveal the transparent power code that operates institutional systems (Smith, 2005). Thus, in addition to focusing on the interviewees’ direct experiences of the discursive encounter, the interviews addressed their daily working routines in order to track the institutional procedures and practices that govern the daily practice of the social workers and expose the institutional and discursive forces that affected them (DeVault & McCoy, 2006).

The research design consisted of two phases that took place between 2015 and 2017, at the time the new critical programs were introduced into the field. The first phase built on the daily experiences of 25 social workers and managers at all levels of the welfare system scale, ranging from street-level social workers to managers at the Ministry headquarters. Seventeen of the interviewees in the first phase were field level professionals, 11 of them were street-level social workers, and six were field level managers. The other eight interviews in the first phase were conducted with managers at the Ministry headquarters. In the second phase, building on data and conclusions collected at the first stage, we interviewed 16 social workers and managers. At this stage, three interviews were conducted with street-level social workers, seven with field level managers, and six with headquarters managers (DeVault, 2006; McCoy, 2006). To illustrate social workers’ experiences, practice,
and discursive conduct (Lipsky, 2010), we present here the analysis of 14 family
social workers, 11 from the first phase and 3 from the second phase of the research.
With one exception, all of the social workers were women. They were aged 29–52,
with eight years’ seniority on average. Family social workers are the street-level
professionals of the social services departments in Israel and are responsible for
both material and emotional aspects of support for the families they serve. We
used criteria sampling (Patton, 1990) to identify social workers in social services
included in the pilot programs that adopted the Poverty-Aware Paradigm, building
on their extensive experience of the tension between the public field’s affinity for
managerialism and conservative thought (Payne, 2014) and the critical agenda
embedded in these programs.

Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990) that focused on the direct experience
of the discursive encounter and the social workers’ daily working procedures
were conducted by the first author. The interviews were focused on highlighting
decision-making procedures and rationales and extracting organizational
storylines. They took place in locations chosen by the interviewees, lasted an aver-
age of two hours each, and were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees’
consent.

Data were analyzed in two steps. The first of these included category coding, in
which experiences, idioms, and discursive descriptions presented by the interview-
ees were marked based on the open coding of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).
The theme of the emotional pain experienced by social workers during encounters
with colleagues who opposed the Poverty-Aware Paradigm emerged during this
stage. In the second phase, we analyzed the emotional cost of what we understood
as the managerialist power position, a theme with which we were familiar from the
literature. Focusing on the discursive content of the managerial power position
and the subjective meanings of the emotional cost of the tensions between the
opposing discourses, we were able to see how denial of recognition emerged in
the organizational processes and interactions (McCoy, 2006). Since the first author
has taken part in a variety of ways in training on and supervision of poverty-aware
social work in Israel, his proximity to the field created some sensitivity. We were
conscious of this issue during data collection and maintained maximum distance to
avoid expectations regarding the interviewer and the research findings that might
have raised concerns about credibility (Ellis, 2007). Furthermore, we selected inter-
viewees with whom the first author had no direct or daily contact. His involvement
in the poverty-aware programs was noted during the recruitment process in order
to enable full and open consent. Additionally, ongoing reflexivity concerning the
research process was developed in discussions between the authors to ensure sen-
sitivity and bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). The study was approved by the univer-
sity’s ethics committee as well as by the Research Department of the Ministry of
Social Affairs and Social Services. All participants signed informed consent forms
prior to the interviews. All names and identifying information regarding the loca-
tion of the participants were changed to ensure anonymity.
Findings

We worked inductively to indicate the dimensions relevant for the encounter between managerialism and critical professionalism. In what follows, we begin by tracking forms of expression used to justify managerialist decisions using common and publicly acceptable principles of professional discourse. Next, we focus on the subjective experiences of social workers who adopted the Poverty-Aware Paradigm.

The managerialist power position

Entering the field, we found that the social workers who expressed critical attitudes also articulated managerial and conservative standpoints, sometimes as an expression of a systemic stance toward these workers, and sometimes as their own position. A closer examination of the ways in which managerial discourse is formulated in social workers’ words revealed a coalition of two discursive storylines. The first of these is the conservative “culture of poverty” discourse, characterized by a paternalist view of service users and labeling them as irresponsible and unreliable (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). The second is a managerialist discourse that promotes the reduction of public expenditure. We learned this as one caseworker explained her choice to reduce engagement with service users: “When I feel they are starting to become dependent, I tell them ‘now you’ll do this on your own.’ When they become too dependent... I know I need to stop. To do less” (Ira, family social worker). Here a discursive coalition emerges as managerial justification for the reduction of public expenditure—manifested here as time investment—and takes hold in the field building on the conservative labeling and othering of service users. Thus, the renunciation of responsibility toward service users is anchored in their conservative labeling as individuals who fail to take sole responsibility for their situation (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010). Exposing this discursive coalition, our approach follows Hajer (1993, 1995), emphasizing how storylines are used by opposing discourses to strengthen their respective power positions.

The concurrent use of both discourses emerges in the forms of speech Yael uses as she describes her clashes at the office. Her discussions with her manager and the administrative official in charge of service users’ material support eligibility are characterized by a mix of mistrusting service users and withholding resources that challenges her intention to engage in critical practice and her commitment to attain material support for the families:

We always feel these clashes... For instance, with my manager, it feels as if it's really hard for her to give material support... she would ask, “Why, how is this happening again, why doesn't he work?”... as if they constantly suspect service users are cheating them. They tell me: “You don’t understand, they’re just stealing money from you”... this is one example, I have a million. As if all the time they feel that people are cheating us... it’s very hard. (Yael, family social worker)
The figure of the dishonest service user, also known as “welfare cheat,” has been described as a discursive tool used to justify income tests, reinforcement of assistance criteria, and the development of a remote paternalistic position of social workers toward service users (Moffatt, 1999). In this case, the message is directed at the baseline code of professionalism attributed to the caseworker, marking her as naïve and unprofessional for allowing the stealing and for not displaying the rational professional stance of suspicion toward service users (Foster, 2008).

Struggling with an inner tendency to inflict a similar form of occupational devaluation on her own practice, Rina links the demand for service users’ motivation with her choice regarding time investment:

I have people who can call me: “Rina, I need you to write me a letter for this and that.” And until they get here, I won’t do it. Not like... as a game, but really to understand their motivation. Because really, many times I’ve left a letter and... after a week or two I’ve gone downstairs, and the letter has still been there. (Rina, family social worker)

As Rina struggles to arrange her caseload and prioritize professional tasks, she uses the precondition of motivation and responsibility on the side of the service user (Garrett, 2017) to justify delaying and not investing time in her. Here the discursive coalition, promoting sole responsibility as an argument for withholding (time) resources, provides the basic storyline for the caseworker’s decision-making rationale.

The discursive coalition serves as a meaning-making tool, allowing the caseworker to cope with systemic pressures. It also highlights the professional dissonance the social worker experiences when her practice is influenced by the critical discourse. In this case, when the interviewer asked Sara how she copes when a family in her care has a need that cannot be formally fulfilled, she replied:

I manage to understand many times that yes, we do have a lot of responsibility, but it’s not all ours. Still, we are talking about independent people... the parents are the ones who should be taking care of it... and sometimes whether a parent can or cannot provide what their children need also says something about him.... (Sara, family social worker)

Sara is trapped in the gap between the critical discourse of the Poverty-Aware Paradigm, with its emphasis on standing by service users and commitment to attaining material support, and the reality of the actual resources she can provide. The appropriate solution is produced by the storyline of the requirement for personal responsibility, which allows her to overlook the systemic deficiency. Thus, the process of denying recognition and the barriers to the implantation of the Poverty-Aware Paradigm demonstrate the presence of the hegemonic managerialist rationale. In the next section, we present experiences of denial of recognition that shed additional light on the frustrations evidenced here.
Denial of recognition

Despite the strength of the conservative-managerialist coalition, mentions of elements of the poverty-aware critical discourse and practice are present in the case-workers’ descriptions. In this section, we examine the reaction to this critical movement, described as the personal and professional prices the social workers have paid. In view of Dahl’s (2009) study that examined the power of the managerial discourse, we analyze these costs as different layers of denial of recognition (Honneth, 1995).

Moria helped a woman to receive public housing after a long delay by sending a letter to the mayor as a way of externally leveraging the system (Timor-Shlevin, 2020). Two weeks later, the woman received the housing solution she had applied for. Intensive and creative practice such as this embodies the poverty-aware principle of standing by service users and the commitment to providing concrete solutions to social rights problems. In the following excerpt, Moria explains her experience regarding this critical practice:

I was criticized...we sat in supervision and I mentioned it, and my manager said, “It doesn’t work that way, it doesn’t work that way...” And another caseworker said, “Excuse me?! You’re diminishing my power as a social worker! Because if I say no, it’s no! Where is my authority?”...They always talk about being “professional,” as if it’s unprofessional...Now, there are things I don’t reveal...I went with this woman to the store because, really, they had no suitable clothing for the winter. I don’t know if it’s unprofessional or not, but if I think about it, it’s super professional, but again, there are different opinions about that. ...(Moria, family social worker)

Several storylines coalesce in the position expressed by Moria’s colleagues: resources must be controlled and cannot be allocated, professionalism is about authority and distance, and service users do not deserve more. Here, the tension between different professional storylines is bound with the social worker’s experiences of isolation vis-à-vis her team and linked with the concealment of certain elements of her practice.

Another layer of denial of recognition at a systemic level is related to the emotional stress social workers describe regarding their critical practice. This burden is associated with experiences of denial of recognition that reinforce its isolating consequences, as the following excerpt shows:

There’s something I have to say about the personal price we pay...a heavy price...When relationships are purely professional, the work is easier. It doesn’t burden your soul, it doesn’t come home with you...When the relationship is a kind of friendship, it’s professional, but...sometimes it’s a burden, it sits on your shoulders. It’s just a thousand times more exhausting. As you get closer, people share more things. They share more, we give more. we give more, we have more to do, it’s just a lot more work. Absolutely. And...if I’m a youth officer social worker, I get
more money being on call. As family social workers in this program, we don’t have this. And it’s totally being on call. All the time. And... they don’t see it and don’t pay for it... and that’s a problem! Sometimes it creates anger and exhaustion. (Yael, family social worker)

First, Yael’s words reveal the emotional implications of the highly intensive work involved in critical social workers being required to always be available. Second, Yael points to her own wavering between opposing professional storylines, one emphasizing clear boundaries and distance between social workers and service users, the other emphasizing a “kind of (professional) friendship” with higher levels of proximity and resulting in a heavier practical–emotional caseload. Her frustration centers on the gap between her professional choice and the systemic denial of recognition and reflects the weakening effect that denial of recognition can have on the institutional change represented by the implementation of poverty-aware programs. Social workers are expected to shoulder the entire burden in an institutional context of refusal to budget critically relevant expenses. Time is also an issue, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

I’m supposed to start working under the local authority next week, which has its disadvantages1... the greatest disadvantage is that there is no flexibility at all in working hours. You can’t switch days or move your working hours. You can’t suddenly arrive in the middle of the day... You must ask for an exception in advance and all that... and sometimes you can have overtime, but it’s complicated. When I worked in the pilot program, really, I had my time and I could... do whatever I wanted.

Q: And how are you going to prepare for that?

A: I’m going to be... stricter. I mean, if the authority is like that, then I’ll be like that. I mean, So, I won’t move working days, I won’t be flexible with the families. And I won’t work extra hours. When my working day is over, I’m out. That’s a shame, but okay. We’ll see how it really works.... (Natasha, family social worker)

The lack of systemic recognition of the professional requirements and unique elements of critical practice—flexible working hours in this case—create negative experiences in the better quality job, which translates into the necessary abandonment of significant elements of the Poverty-Aware Paradigm.

Discussion: Aspects of recognition as discursive power positions

This study sought to address the need for a detailed analysis of the power relations created in direct encounters between the hegemonic managerial discourse and critical professionalism in social work. The findings indicate that the rarely addressed implicit, interpersonal dimension of recognition is a salient marker of discursive
power that operates in our case to maintain the power position of managerialism as it faces the challenge of critical professionalism. Thus, this study reveals the nuanced movements of recognition at the street level as indicative of a struggle over professionalization. Although critical commitment is based on recognition, redistribution, and representation, as illustrated by Fraser (2003), the social workers in this study reflected mainly on the operation of recognition. Thus, the analysis of redistribution and representation remained beyond the scope of this paper. Our analysis illustrates three aspects of recognition connected with the managerialist standpoint that opposes the implementation of poverty-aware critical professionalism: the discursive, the interpersonal, and the institutional.

The discursive aspect of recognition is related to the hegemonic stand of the discursive coalition in the field. It clarifies how critical professional discourse is covertly rejected and constructed as irrational and irrelevant in the face of the conservative–managerialist stance (Hajer, 1995), providing the common justifications for professional action. Social workers are exposed to negative attribution and feel that justifications grounded in the discursive coalition are incontestable. The presentation of these justifications as self-explanatory and fundamental prevents dialogue that can challenge them. Furthermore, when social workers attempt to defy this logic with critical arguments, they experience a sense of weakness and frustration. When frustration is accompanied by a message that denies their professional knowledge and experience (Benjamin, 2016), the discursive denial of recognition is linked to experiences of social isolation, which signify the second aspect of recognition.

The interpersonal aspect of recognition relates to the ways in which the conservative–managerialist discursive coalition undermines poverty-aware social work in daily routines, resulting in social workers experiencing social isolation. The denial of personal and professional recognition is described by social workers as a common response to situations in which they engage in critical practice. The findings indicate that the choice to stand by service users was, in the participants’ view, the reason for the social isolation they suffered. The literature describes various cases in which exclusion, personal contempt, and the marking of workers as irrational are used to reject professional arguments in favor of managerialism (Benjamin, 2016). Validating Gofen’s (2014) identification of collective divergence among Israeli social workers, participants reported experiencing isolation, disagreements, and negative labeling on the part of their colleagues. At the interpersonal level, the divergence becomes particularly disturbing when social workers are labeled unprofessional by their managers and teammates. The social workers described how experiences of isolation led them to conceal certain elements of their critical practice. It should be noted that while the picture of interpersonal isolation was not homogeneous, interpersonal recognition as professional support for the social workers was not evident in the findings. This experience of isolation adds to Gofen’s (2014) analysis of divergence by illustrating two ways in which power is applied at the street level: first as an indicator of discursive power relations and second as an impediment to professional change.
The institutional aspect of recognition reflected in cases in which the welfare system ignores structural elements that enable critical practice. The analysis revealed institutional disregard for professional needs such as a flexible system for calculating working hours or payment for on-call hours. Social workers who engaged in critical practice relied on their own resources, practically becoming professional volunteers. Thus, institutional recognition relates to the extent to which critical practice requirements are formally met. Institutional recognition has largely been examined in broad contexts of public services budgeting (Pavolini & Klenk, 2015). In our study, institutional recognition expands the literature that investigates the micro-level of street-level bureaucrats (Brodkin, 2011; Jones, 2001) to identify professionals’ experiences of institutional neglect as an indicator of discursive power. These experiences were manifested in various forms of marginalization and linked to the difficulty of maintaining critical practice over time.

Limitations of the study

This study has two limitations. First, it presents the voices of social workers in a small number of local social services departments in Israel, while in other departments organizational behavior and professional discourse may be different and thus create other institutional and professional options. Second, the study focused on new pilot programs that are taking their first steps in terms of implementation. It may be too early for the critical discourse to have gained a significant power position in the field. Yet for the purpose of analyzing the understudied encounter between managerialism and critical professionalism, the timing of the research was precise, as it enabled the exposure of the encounter as it played out for the first time, allowing the contesting storylines to appear fully and directly. To better examine the operation of recognition in the encounter between opposing professional discourses, further research can raise questions regarding the connections between recognition and other power position parameters, such as budgeting, standardization, and organizational procedures.

Conclusions

Analyzing recognition as a marker of discursive power exposes the nuanced ways in which critically informed professionals attempt to promote institutional professional change and reveals the methods used by other professionals such as managers and colleagues to conceal these changes. As our study demonstrates, when new critical programs are introduced by the Ministry’s management, critical professional discourse can overcome barriers and take a proportional hold at the professional street level. Yet, this professional change is confronted with strong opposition, manifested in three parallel aspects: the rejection of critical discursive rationality and respect, relational isolation, and an institutional denial of specific requirements for critical practice. The social workers in our study who wished to promote the newly introduced critical practice were required to do so behind the
scenes, alone. Thus, we conclude that the specific issue of the prevention of the recognition of critical practice must be resolved in order to ensure that it can be implemented and accepted as rational practice.

The process that we revealed in our analysis points to the fragile position of critical professionalization in social work in Israel. While critical social work scholars insist on continuing to develop professionalization in terms of social justice and practical responses to the needs of people living in poverty, denial of recognition is used to limit the influence of these professional principles on social workers in practice. The denial of recognition emerges as an instrument that weakens the trend toward critical professionalization, encouraging social workers to incorporate managerialist principles at the expense of professional considerations. By revealing this process, we were able to highlight the operation of recognition as a mechanism in the covert struggle over professionalization. Furthermore, we demonstrated how recognition becomes a salient parameter of discursive power, pointing to three aspects of its operation. These aspects highlight the different levels at which the struggle over professionalization operates: the discursive, the interpersonal, and the institutional. Shaped at these three levels, recognition operates at the street level as a marker of discursive power, maintaining the hegemonic managerialist position and weakening the chances for the implementation of opposing professional approaches such as the Poverty-Aware Paradigm.

At the practical level, attention should be given to different aspects of recognition if we intend to deepen the integration of critical practice in social work. Recognition can be addressed in the broad training of various players in the field in order to reduce the discursive inconsistency that currently exists between social workers and their colleagues. Further attention should be given to the structural requirements of critical practice, such as limiting working hours or making caseworkers’ private phone numbers available, and the establishment of organizational mechanisms to address these professional needs. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature by pointing to the parameter of recognition and offering an analysis of its operation at the discursive, interpersonal, and institutional levels under circumstances of professional policy struggle at the street level. Finally, it offers practical conclusions for the implementation of critical programs into public services.

**Authors’ Note**

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**Ethics**

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Note

1. As the pilot program is embedded into the local authority’s system, the workers are employed directly by the local authority instead of by the nongovernmental organization that operated the pilot. In general, transition to direct employment is considered to be beneficial to the worker, since it improves job security.

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