

Research Literature Review

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Capitalism is the predominant economic system in the United States, where private ownership controls the means of production with profit as a primary goal. Because of free market and privatization policies instituted by the U.S. government in the last few decades, some describe our system as neoliberal capitalism (Zeira, 2022). Neoliberal capitalism has been criticized for disempowering workers, contributing to income inequality, reducing the effectiveness of healthcare systems, and negatively impacting mental health.

This literature review focuses on research surrounding the impact of neoliberal capitalistic values on corporate norms, their impact on worker mental health, and an understanding of which marginalized populations are most vulnerable to those impacts. Economic policies affect institutions and communities and thus become socioecological factors in the mental well-being of virtually all clients a counselor may treat. The review seeks to surface the themes, trends, contraindications, and gaps in the literature related to this research focus.

Themes and Trends

Theoretical Perspectives

Neoliberalism is both a socioeconomic and ideological framework, manifesting in national and institutional policy as well as social values (Zeira, 2022). Neoliberalism, or at least capitalist economic policy, is a focus in a subset of the selected literature (Zeira, 2022; Kokorikou et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2022; Card & Hepburn, 2023; Wrenn, 2022; Mullany et al., 2021; Hunt, 2023), while others do not mention capitalism or policy-level impacts on mental health. This illustrates a contrast of individualistic views on mental health versus systemic views in research. One aspect of neoliberalism is the concept of personal wherewithal, the idea of

achieving any goal with enough work and talent (Card & Hepburn, 2023). Corporate mindfulness is one mechanism of how neoliberalism manifests in the corporate workspace, where companies invest in programs and policies to treat mental illness as a problem for the individual to resolve, in order to return to being productive employees (Wrenn, 2022). The idea of diseases being problems to solve by the individual is also termed “healthism” (Mullany et al., 2021).

Intersectional theory is also explored in a subset of literature (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Mullany et al., 2021; Han et al., 2023; Owens et al., 2022), specifically on how mental health stressors can impact individuals with intersectional identities in unique, compounding ways. Most reviewed literature do not explore intersectionality, and if they analyze cultural identity differences, they tend to isolate aspects of identity when measuring mental health outcomes.

Key Findings

Neoliberalism is associated with exploitative workloads, worsening mental health outcomes for workers, and a depoliticization of mental illness in the workplace (Zeira, 2022; Kokorikou et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2022; Card & Hepburn, 2023; Wrenn, 2022; Mullany et al., 2021; Hunt, 2023). An example of depoliticization is the rise of corporate mindfulness programs, such as subsidized mental health services, which divert focus toward individual responsibility and away from structural forces like labor exploitation and alienation (Wrenn, 2022).

Racial, sexual, and gender minorities in the workplace have a higher prevalence of mental health symptoms, such as stress, anxiety, and burnout, than those of the dominant culture (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2023; Mind Share Partners, 2023; Mullany et al., 2021; Han et al., 2023; Owens et al., 2022). In addition, an individual’s age and disability status also impact the prevalence of mental health symptoms, specifically workplace stress seems to diminish with

age (Mind Share Partners, 2023; Han et al., 2023) and people with disabilities are alienated by neoliberal ideologies that place the problem with the individual (Hunt, 2023). Finally, those who have intersectional identities may face unique social stressors leading to higher workplace stress, e.g., as found by Mullany et al. (2021) who assessed the mental health of African American men with low SES.

Differences in Methodologies

Studies differed in how they sourced their data: some used online surveys (Mind Share Partners, 2023; Kang et al., 2023), some used government data (Kang et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2022), one was a longitudinal survey using paper questionnaires (Han et al., 2023), some used a combination of survey modalities (Owens et al., 2022; American Psychology Association [APA], 2024), one was a qualitative study using interview data (Mullany et al., 2021), and one was a meta-analysis of existing quantitative research (Alghamdi et al., 2023). Response collection for mental health status also varied, e.g., Owens et al. (2022) asked research participants to provide their mental well-being as a response to single 5-point Likert scale question, while Piao et al. (2022) and Mind Share Partners (2023) collected data in the form of granular mental health symptoms. Of the selected literature, only Card & Hepburn (2023) collected data on personal neoliberal beliefs, using a survey of four-point Likert scale questions.

Differences in Sample Populations

Sampled populations differ by cultural identity. Owens et al. (2022) sampled populations who self-identified as LGBTQ+, while Mullany et al. (2021) sampled low-SES African American men, and Alghamdi et al. (2023) studied a cross-section of women. Some studies sampled populations and weighted their answers based on their representation in the general U.S. populations (APA, 2024; Mind Share Partners, 2023). Several studies did not focus on any

specific cultural identity outside of being a working adult or at least 16 years of age (Card & Hepburn, 2021; Han et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2022).

Another difference in sample population is the country of residence for participants and researchers. While most of the reviewed research sampled U.S. populations, some studies were run in Canada (Card & Hepburn, 2021; Owens et al., 2022), while Piao et al. (2022) ran their study in Japan, and Alghamdi et al. (2023) analyzed research from many countries across North America, South America, Europe, and Asia.

Gaps in the Literature

Most of the research is based on cross-sectional studies. The main longitudinal study that was reviewed focused on the relationship between age and perceived workplace stress (Han et al., 2023). This implies a gap in longitudinal research on workplace stress and mental health outcomes, controlling variables outside of age. Card & Hepburn (2021) recommend future longitudinal studies to support research into the long-term effects of holding certain sets of social beliefs, in the context of changing political landscapes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a large body of research on how neoliberal policies and ideology in general impact worker mental health, but there is a lack of in-depth research on specific corporate programs and policies, surveillance, and automation, and their impact on worker mental health. Wrenn (2022) and Hunt (2023) describe specific corporate programs and link them to both neoliberalism and mental health but are narrative articles. APA (2024) studies the correlation between specific policies and psychological safety, and automation and surveillance on worker mental health in general. But it does not break down the data by cultural identity nor presents scholarly statistical analysis of the data. This leaves a specific gap of quantitative analysis that correlates specific policies and mental health, controlling for cultural identity. Furthermore, none

of the studies directly measured employee perception of their company's profit motives, i.e., neoliberal or not.

Finally, several articles critique neoliberal policies and viewpoints but there is a lack of literature to study alternatives. For example, while Wrenn (2022) and Hunt (2023) critique neoliberal wellness programs, there is a noticeable gap in research on the benefits of alternative policies and ideology.

Analysis

Agreements and Disagreements

There is broad agreement that neoliberalism is associated with higher prevalence of worker stress and mental health symptoms (Zeira, 2022; Kokorikou et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2022; Wrenn, 2022; Mullany et al., 2021; Hunt, 2023). However, Card & Hepburn (2023) found that holding neoliberal beliefs correlated with higher life satisfaction in individuals. Researchers in future studies should check their personal biases and acknowledge nuance when studying the impacts of neoliberalism on mental health.

There seems to be universal agreement that marginalized populations report higher prevalence of work-related mental health symptoms (Mullany et al., 2021; Owens et al., 2022; Hunt, 2023; Alghamdi et al., 2023; Mind Share Partners, 2023). However, there seems to be a debate in whether corporate wellness programs have a positive or negative impact on worker mental health. Mind Share Partners (2023) and APA (2024) report positive impacts of wellness programs on mental health and psychological safety, respectively, while Wrenn (2022) and Hunt (2023) criticize those programs as being ideological tools to divert attention away from effective structural change. Nuanced and balanced research is needed to reconcile the two sides of the debate.

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The reviewed quantitative studies draw from large sample sizes, e.g., Owens et al. (2022) sampled 531 responses, Han et. Al (2023) sampled 1,139 responses, and Mind Share Partners (2023) sampled 1,500 responses. Additionally, Mind Share Partners (2023) weighted their response data by representativeness in the general population. Large sample sizes and representation of the general population increase their results' generalizability.

On the other hand, the quantitative studies relied on surveys, which have limitations related to self-reporting. Responses are based on individual interpretation of the questions, which may be varied for Likert-scale questions on mental well-being. Responses are also based on recall ability, meaning that there may be recency bias in the reports of lived experiences. There may also be bias towards a perceived “right” answer, e.g., if the respondent has a positive value perception of reporting a positive mental health outlook. Finally, there may be a selection bias that arise from limiting the number of recruitment channels (e.g., Facebook) or the number of modalities to accept survey responses (e.g., requires a readily available device and Internet connection).

There was one qualitative study reviewed: Mullany et al. (2021). It has a strength of presenting rich, in-depth analysis of lived intersectional experience. However, it is limited to low generalizability due to a small sample size ($n = 42$).

Coverage of the Research Focus

The existing research covers how neoliberalism affects worker mental health, some examples of how neoliberalism manifests in corporate policy, and how marginalized populations are the most impacted. The direct impact of specific corporate policies on marginalized

populations' mental health, their long-term effects, and the relative impacts by population are still unknown.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature confirms that neoliberalism negatively impacts worker mental health in the U.S. and impacts marginalized populations the most. Future research should focus on quantifying the impact of specific corporate policies on mental health, be longitudinal, balance critical theory, and recommend sub-populations to focus structural accommodations and advocacy efforts. Informed by this literature, the next steps are to articulate a specific hypothesis and test, and to surface important implications for counselors.

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