**LITERATURE REVIEW ON MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK
AND SOCIAL WORKERS**

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INTRODUCTION

For the last thirty years there has been the view that UK media representation, specifically press reporting, has been unfairly negative and biased against social work and social workers. A Community Care magazine poll of 1,000 UK social workers carried out in 2000, found that 9 out 10 respondents felt that negative reporting creates hostility from the general public, with 8 out of 10 blaming it for increasing mistrust from service users (Neate 2000). A similar figure was found in a more recent survey of Scottish social workers for The Glasgow Herald which showed that 88.6% of social workers did not feel that they were fairly represented by the media (Naysmith 2004).

This perception has been reflected in research on the representation of social work in the press. Since the first major research project on the media representation of social work was published in the 1970s, the findings of such projects has remained consistent. The key messages being that the media is hostile towards social workers. A typical additional conclusion is that the profession is incompetent in communicating with the outside world, and is uniformly suspicious of journalists. This paper highlights the difficult relationship between the media and social work, provides an explanation of such reporting, the impact of media coverage on social work practice, and highlights the strategies for remedying this situation. The concluding discussion section includes a number of suggestions to be considered by the Social Work Review, which could promote a more positive representation of social work in Scotland.

SOCIAL WORK AND THE MEDIA

Emphasis on Child Welfare

Due to the complexity, and the protracted nature of the work, most social work is of little interest to the media and the wider public. Social work stories only become of interest when major failures occur in the system, and when they are related to a particular sphere of the social work remit (Wroe 1988). As a correspondent to a Community Care Magazine suggested, "All the good we do is frankly irrelevant. Bad news and scandals sell papers, simple as that." (Neate 2000). Content analysis of national press reports of social work has consistently highlighted that issues to do with child abuse and other related areas of child welfare are the most commonly reported social work story. Franklin and

Parton's examination of press articles on social work published in a 12 month period between 1997 and 1998 found that 67% of the articles concerned children (Franklin & Parton 2001). Whilst media interest in child abuse cases can be traced back to the New York Times coverage of the Mary Ellen in the 1870s (Gough 1996), it has only been since the 1960s there has been a surge in child welfare stories in the media, rising substantially following the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 and the resulting public inquiry.

KEY POINTS:
- Due to its complexity and protracted nature, social work is usually of little interest to the media.
- However stories about social work failures, particularly those involving children are viewed as newsworthy.

EXPLANATIONS OF NEGATIVE MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Social Work and Newsworthiness

Whilst some researchers have attempted to explore wider media representation of social work (for instance social work in American television drama (Tower 2000), and Hollywood movies (Valentine & Freeman 2002)), due to its accessibility and manageability most research has focused on the national press (Wroe 1988). Analysis of local press reporting has highlighted that they are a lot more positive in their reporting of social work issues (Alridge 1990). Fry (1991) suggests that the trade press is also less prejudiced in their reporting of social work, attributing the financial dependence of some specialist publications to public sector advertising.

Wroe's (1988) research into the reporting of social work by the national press discusses how certain social work stories are viewed as newsworthy using the concept of news values . This criteria had originally been developed by media sociologists in the 1970s to explain why crime stories received so much prominence in the press. The eight news values or imperatives which a story should achieve are: immediacy, dramaticisation, personalisation, simplification, titillation, conventionalism, structured access and novelty. The greater the number of news values the story covers, the more likely it is to be covered by the press. Due to the nature of the work, most social work related stories fail to

become newsworthy as they do not fit many of these imperatives. As Wroe suggests there is a fundamental incompatibility between the nature of much social work (as it is slow and complex) and the characteristics of newsworthiness. Social work stories only become of interest when grand failures occur, which are typically brought to others attention through public inquires.

Press reporting of the Beckford Inquiry

The 1985 Beckford Inquiry was one event which did a achieve a number of these news values, and subsequently received a great deal of coverage. Analysing this reporting, Wroe said that there were five key negative images of social worker presented by the newspaper: social work as naïve, gullible, incompetent (and negligent), barely trained (and training misguided anyway), and powerful, heartless bureaucrats. However, two positive images of social worker were provided by the press: of caring individuals, who do difficult, stressful and complex work. As might be expected there was disparity between the type of newspapers, and the positivity of the reporting. The Guardian was the least critical of social work, with The Sun being the most negative focusing on the impact, drama of the Inquiry and providing a victim / culprit viewpoint. Wroe provides some explanation of social work's vulnerability in these cases, suggesting this is due to the organisation of social work departments (particularly the lack of self-regulating and self-disciplinary powers), and their ineptitude in handling the press.

Cleveland

Franklin and Parton's (1991) analysis of the Cleveland sex abuse case also highlighted that newspaper constructed social workers in a similar light (i.e. incompetent and authoritarian bureaucrats). The press also reported the lack of integrated working ("'Whenever two or more members of the caring profession are gathered together to solve a problem, a string of inept decisions will follow' (Daily Mirror, 6 July 1988;12)" (quoted in Franklin and Parton 1991;16), social workers laid back attitude, lack of accountability, and being too easily susceptible to 'trendy' theories. The case was also framed as a dispute between the state's commitment to protect children and parents' rights to exercise an equivalent paternalism.

'Folk Devils and the rise of the New Right'

As well as the Beckford and Cleveland stories being newsworthy for the reasons outlined above, it has also been suggested that they were of interest to the press as the errors highlighted by the inquiries fitted in with a wider 'New Right' critique of the welfare state, supported by the conservative press. In her examination of the press coverage of the Orkney sex abuse allegations, Winter (1992) links the negative press reporting to a 'crisis of hegemony' in British society. Changes in the global labour market during the early 1970s, and the subsequent growth in new technology resulted in the domestic economic base becoming fragile. The post-war social democratic model focused around the welfare state and full employment was increasingly questioned, resulting in the ascent of monetarist policies and the associated 'New Right' ideology. Closely aligned to Thatcherism, this neo-liberal doctrine emphasised the central role of the market, and the freedom of the individual. Winter suggests the the ideology emphasised the alleged failure of the 'evils' of state intervention and the social democratic programme, suggesting that the British way of life was being threatened by the British way of life both economically and morally. In a response to these threats a series of 'folk devils' were constructed who, "came to represent those whose jobs, outlooks, attitudes and practices reflected the principles of social democracy and who were therefore perceived as undermining the traditional virtues of society." (Winter 1992;8) The media, particularly the conservative press played a crucial role in the creation of these 'folk devils'. Being one of the key products of the social democratic agenda and also viewed by many as unaccountable, social workers were swiftly demonised.

The Thatcherite, and 'New Right' defence and preservation of the nuclear family further questioned the interventionist stance of social workers who were viewed as taking away the rights and responsibilities of parents, the church and community. As Franklin and Parton highlight, "Social workers moreover symbolize the state's altruistic concerns and by caring for the poor, disabled, elderly and sick, offer an implicit critique of the family and community…"(Franklin and Parton 1991;9). The attack on social work also fitted in neatly with the Thatcherite agenda of degrading local government, particularly local authorities that were seen as following a 'loony left' agenda. Overall press reporting tends to be 'warmer' towards the voluntary sector of social care, as

opposed to the statutory sector (Franklin & Parton 2001). This has been linked to the increased market-orientation of social work in the 1980s and 1990 with work being carried out by voluntary and private sector seen as more 'legitimate' (Franklin & Parton 1991).

Orkney

Along with others, Winter (1992) suggests that this wider ideological shift contributed to negative media representations of social workers. Her content analysis of 60 articles published in the UK national press on the Orkney sex abuse allegation suggests that the press promoted the view that social workers were incompetent, and too authoritarianism (social work intervention should be reduced in order to preserve the family). There is also an emphasise in the articles for the social work profession to return to a common sense style practice and be more grounded in law. The training of social workers also needs to be improved, and more mature people should join the profession.

Internationally

There also appear to be differences in how social work is represented by the press internationally with there being only been one major academic study of social work and the media in the US (Davenport 1997a; 1997b). Reid and Misener (2001) have been only a handful of researchers to carry out an international comparison on representation of social work in the press, comparing newspaper coverage during a particular timescale in the UK and US. Reflecting the findings of other research they found that in both countries most social work news stories focused on child-related concerns, such as child abuse, adoption, foster care and group homes. However in the US such stories were presented more positively in the press – a 30% mean image rating, compared to 27% in the UK. In both countries, mental health was the field with the most positive image, with the greatest inter-country difference in image being for the family service field (this can be explained by family services more likely being public in the UK). The researchers also developed a classification of social work roles from the stories (direct helper, investigator, monitor, advocates, educators, administrators, and community organisers). The role receiving the most negative image was that of monitor, with the investigator coming a close second. The role of educator received the most positive image in both countries.

Reid and Misener (2001) concluded that social work has a serious image problem in the UK press, with the profession being represented much more positively in the US. Although their data does not have much to say about why the UK-US differences occur, they do provide a number of possible explanations for the variation. Firstly, the structure of the American press is different compromising predominantly of local and regional titles, which is more likely to keep local news local. The conservative stance of the British press is also emphasised, which has been traditionally biased against social workers and the welfare state. It is also suggested that the differences can be accounted for by differences in the nature of social work between the two countries. In the US, educational qualifications for social workers have been traditionally higher, and there have been great stability in qualifications used to define professional social work.

KEY POINTS:

- The appeal of certain social work stories, can be explained through concepts such as news values. Such stories usually become newsworthy, if they cover a number of news values typically focused around failure.

- The negative representation of social work has been linked to the rise of the 'new right' in the 1970s and 1980s. Press representations reflected the 'new right's' questioning of the welfare state.

- The Beckford, Cleveland and Orkney cases highlight the prominence given to child welfare social work stories by the press during the 1980s and 1990s.

- Press reporting of these cases represented social workers as being incompetent and authoritarian bureaucrats.

- A research project has suggested that press reporting of social work in the US is less negative, which has been attributed to the different structure of the press, and the higher level of educational qualification for social workers.

THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Neate (1997) suggests that one of the consequences of the negative depiction of social work, has been that potential users of such services fear the intervention of social workers in their lives. Such representation has also had a direct impact on social work practice and policy. As Wroe (1988) highlights the press reporting of the Colwell case in the early 1970s had a direct consequence on legislation, resource allocation and prioritisation in social services departments. The 1975 Children's Act reflected public reaction to the Colwell case, and the 1989 Children's Act also responded to similar concerns raised by the Cleveland case. Despite the push towards early intervention, media coverage of high profile child abuse cases has often resulted in resources being shifted away to child protection, with a subsequent increase in the number of place of safety orders, and numbers of cases on child abuse registers. Following the Colwell inquiry place of safety orders trebled, and subsequently increased again from a rate of 0.45 per 1,000 (0-17) to 0.73 in 1987 (Franklin and Parton 1991;30). Negative press coverage resulted in social workers becoming more cautious, with an over-arching concern to 'cover themselves' for every eventuality resulting in more red tape (Wroe 1988). It has been suggested that this has led to a drop in staff morale, an increase in staff absences, problems with retention and recruitment, and difficulties in promoting social work as a career to new recruits. Research carried out for Community Care magazine in 2000, highlighted that 4 out of 10 people working within social work had thought about leaving their post, or the profession altogether, as a result of negative media coverage. People working for local authorities were more disillushioned than those working for the voluntary sector (Neate 2000).

KEY POINTS:
- Since the 1970s negative press coverage of social work has had an impact on related legislation.
- Despite the push towards early intervention, one consequence of press coverage has been the shift of resources to child protection.
- Surveys of social workers have indicated that negative press coverage has a direct impact on staff morale.

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE COVERAGE

The research outlined above has continued to reinforce the view held by many in social work that journalists are routinely and unfairly hostile towards them. Journalists have refuted this criticism by highlighting that social workers and social departments have been notoriously poor in promoting their work and examples of good practice. Social workers have been accused of erecting a linguistic barrier around themselves full of jargon and acronyms, and routinely ignoring the publication deadlines of journalists (Neate 1997). The Victoria Climbie inquiry highlighted that all professionals working with children needed to avoid profession-specific language. Such jargon has hampered integrated working, exposed poor practice, and increased the risk of negative media coverage (Axford and Bullock 2005). In response to this criticism of social work poor record of media liaison most articles on this issue attempt to provide advice on improving the image of social work. Such advice is linked to the acknowledgement of the importance of the media in promoting social work to the general public, and the acknowledgement of the need for organisations to have a high 'corporate profile' a key indicator used by government to judge effectiveness in applying for public funds (Alridge 1999).

Much of this guidance is focused on the need for departments to employ specialist communications teams to promote the work of the area, and dealing with crisis management. Recommendations are given that all social work staff should all receive media and communications training, so that they are equipped with the knowledge of when to promote 'good' news stories, how to plan a media strategy, and writing press releases. The Community Care's guide 'The Media and the Message' (1997) provides advice on such topics. An example of how Glasgow City Council used crisis management is provided in the booklet, following the chief social worker being mis-quoted as suggesting that the drug ecstasy was safer than asprin (Neate and Philpot 1997) This emphasis on media training is also not new, with guidance and the call for such training being made as far back as the early 1980s (Hills 1980).

Evidence of the effectiveness of appointing social work public relations officers and also professionals receiving media and PR training is also patchy. Due to the newspapers market focus, and their ideological apathy, it has been

suggested that little impact can be made in the short-term in changing the press attitude towards social work. Few newspapers have specialist journalists covering social work stories, with many of the popular publications using journalists who are 'generalists' and have little knowledge or understanding of the complexities of social work. Due to the dominance of middle class men in news production, and the large number of women employed in social work, it has also been suggested that negative representation of the profession can be also be linked to wider issues around sexism (Franklin and Parton 2001). This is represented in news room dynamics with it being alleged that male journalists are less interested in reporting social work stories, and within the social care workforce (Skidmore 1995 quoted in Franklin and Parton 2001)Although dedicated social work press relations teams have been set up by some departments and organisations, a poll for Community Care magazine highlighted that social work professionals felt these teams do not know enough about the situations they are discussing. More than 30% of professionals in local authorities said that their main media contacts have little or no understanding of the work that is done with clients (Neate 2000). Elsewhere it has been suggested that such teams have been too dependent of giving stories to 'safe' specialist writers who they can trust rather than the mainstream press (Fry in Franklin & Parton 1991).

In their comparison of US and UK press coverage of social work, Reid and Misener (2001) suggest a number of strategies for enhancing the image of social work. Newspapers and social work academics could work closer together, with academic 'experts' being made more readily available to comment on specific stories. They too advocate social workers becoming more proactive which would include, "cultivating and working with media personnel, writing stories of columns for local newspapers, appearing as experts in the press and on talk shows, preparing and distributing news releases and publicising advocacy efforts." (Reid and Misener 2001).

It is also worth noting that although there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that social workers have traditionally been poorly represented by the media, this negative representation does not necessarily translate into the general public automatically having a poor of social work. Reflecting wider research into the

active nature of media audiences, some studies of public perceptions of social work have highlighted that negative media representation of social workers does not necessarily translate into wider negative images of social workers. A New Society poll carried out in 1981 found that 48% of respondents thought social workers were 'caring people in a difficult job'. The recent MORI poll for the Review showed that 47% of respondents gained their understanding of social workers through television news and current affairs, with 36% citing national newspapers as their source. However personal experience or contact was viewed as the most influential (32%), with only 20% indicating that television news / current affairs and 10% for the national press as being the most influential.

KEY POINTS:

- Guidance on enhancing the image of social work / social workers has focused on the need for departments to employ specialist communications teams.
- Evidence on the effectiveness of a having dedicated communications team has been

 'patchy'.

- Negative media representation of social workers does not necessarily translate into wider negative images of social workers.

DISCUSSION

The Social Work Review provides a unique opportunity to address the representation of social work and social workers in Scotland. As this literature review has highlighted, the media coverage of social work directly links into the key issues being addressed by the Review, for instance the delivery and organisation of social work, legislation, and the workforce. Utilising some of this evidence this section includes a number of suggestions for addressing some of these long-standing issues.

As the previous section 'Responding To Negative Coverage' discussed, the existing literature on the media and social work has provided practical guidance on techniques and strategies social work can utilise to enhance their image, and

to also lessen the impact of negative publicity. Evidence has suggested that voluntary and private sector organisations in social care are more effective in communicating, and are more likely to receive favourable press coverage, so much of this published guidance has been predominantly aimed at those working in statutory sector. Such techniques recommended in the guidance include:

- Compulsory media / communication training for all social work staff.
- Appointment of specific press / communication officer / teams for each local authority social work.
- Identifying a media strategy and media planning.
- Training on writing press releases, articles and letters to newspapers. Organising press conferences
- Crisis Management.
- Avoiding jargon.

The impact of these techniques is likely to be patchy if introduced individually, or for a short period of time. Appointing a dedicated social work media liaison person in each local authority may boost the presence, but is unlikely to be able to challenge the ingrained political viewpoint of newspapers. It is also unclear about how widely such techniques are used by local authorities already, and so one suggestion for addressing this issue could be that a:

1. **A NATIONAL COMMUNICATION AUDIT OF LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL WORK** be carried out to identify gaps in media strategies and identify good practice, as well explore related issues such as media training. A similar exercise was carried out in 2003 for the Scottish Executive by the communication agency Barkers who carried out an audit of all local youth justice teams. The exercise provided a useful overview of the various (and sometime non existence) techniques used by local teams. Barkers also provided practical advice to local authorities for enhancing their strategy. Such an exercise could be carried out bi-annually, and local authorities would be required to act on all action points highlighted.

An additional action point which could result from this exercise, or could be considered independently is the creation of a:

2. **NATIONAL CONTACT POINT FOR PUBLICITY, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING IN SOCIAL WORK:** This small team would comprise of a small group of experienced media professionals and social worker, whose primarily task would be to strategically publicise and promote social work and social workers in Scotland. They would take a proactive role, and adopt a coherent approach of promoting social work to the local, regional and national media, as well the professional press. The team would provide advice on crisis management as required, and provide training in communications to all social workers working in the statutory sector. Whilst there may be a problem with the national team not fully understanding the local context, they would complement the work being done by local teams, and be able to advise where applicable. Whilst organisations such as the ADSW already attempt to provide some of these functions, this team would provide a dedicated, full-time resource which could be drawn upon by the whole sector.

Linked to this national resource would be the creation of a media friendly 'pool of experts', who have both academic and recent professional experience:

3. **ACADEMIC-PROFESSIONAL 'POOL OF EXPERTS':** Working closely with this national contact point for social work, key academics from Scotland's social work departments would play a key part in disseminating and discussing social work issues within the media. This 'pool of experts' reflects the media's desire for specialist commentators, who are easily contactable. They would receive specialist media training for taking on this role. To supplement this knowledge social work departments and academics would be encouraged to work closer and to regularly share and update their knowledge and experience. This could include an exchange programme between both organisations, where key social work professionals spend 6 months, every 3 years lecturing and academics spend a similar amount of time working in the field.

Finally, new technology offers the opportunity for social worker to avoid some of the traditional obstacles they have had to face in promoting 'good news':

4. **MORE EFFECTIVE USE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY** Although most local authorities already have an effective presence on the internet, better use of such new technology to promote social work could be encouraged. Even though a sizeable proportion of the population do not have regular internet access, such technology offers social workers unfiltered access to a wide audience for sharing local successes and good practice. Although the move away from designated social work departments may make the promotion of local authority social work more complex, the internet has the potential to unite social work from across the authority.

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