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## **Scapegoats or Sacrificial Lambs? How Media Vilification of Social Workers Impacts on Work Practices**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how social work is portrayed in the media and the effect this has on social workers. Six practicing social workers were interviewed. Most interviewees felt that they were affected negatively by media reporting of social work, both on personal and professional levels. The research found that this impacts on morale and two social workers were quite adamant that they would not tell people what they do for a living. This lack of pride in the profession is quite alarming and has implications for practice. The research found that work practices and the manner in which social workers deal with child protection and welfare cases are affected by the media. When high profile cases are reported in the media, it leads to an increase in the number of referrals, but no increase in resources, hence 'neglect' cases are 'filtered out' of the system. Practice is becoming increasingly defensive as a result of media scrutiny.

**Key Words:** social work and the media; scapegoating; defensive practice

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Public vilification of Social workers has a negative effect on staff and has serious implications for the effectiveness, status and morale of the children's workforce as a whole. There has been a long-term appetite in the media to portray Social workers in ways that are negative and undermining (Laming, 2009: 44).

## **Background**

Ireland is currently in the grip of a world-wide recession, the likes of which has not been seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Gillespie, 2009). Previous periods of economic hardship have taught us that social problems are likely to be exacerbated by increased levels of poverty. At the same time there have been savage budget cuts in all government departments. In a time when social services are more beleaguered than ever, a HSE 'temporary' embargo on the recruitment of staff has been ongoing since September 2007. In contrast to the embargo in the Irish Health Services, Social Services in other countries such as Wales and Scotland have been actively trying to recruit social workers. However, they have been having difficulties trying to fill the posts. Negative media portrayals and the 'scapegoating' of social workers have been blamed, in part, for low recruitment and poor job retention rates.

This research was carried out in the immediate aftermath of two horrendous child abuse scandals: the 'Baby P'<sup>2</sup> case in the UK, and 'The Roscommon Incest Case'<sup>3</sup> in Ireland. Both of these cases received massive media coverage, most of which was extremely negative towards Social workers. In January 2009, a union official in Haringey, the area where the death of 'Baby P' occurred, said that the 'witch hunt' by the media was having a 'devastating effect' on the number of social workers applying

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<sup>2</sup> Baby P was a 17month old boy who was found dead with horrific injuries, including a broken back, on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007. His mother, her boyfriend and their lodger were found guilty of 'causing or allowing' his death. Haringey social services (Haringey was where Victoria Climbié suffered and died) came in for heavy criticism as the little boy had been seen by health care professionals and social workers more than 50 times in his short life. He was last seen by a Doctor on the day before he was found dead..

<sup>3</sup> In January 2009, a Co. Roscommon mother of six was jailed for seven years for charges including incest, sexual assault and the appalling neglect of her children. It was the first time a woman was brought before the Irish Court on charges of incest. Social workers (involved with the family since 1996) were heavily criticised by the media and public for not taking the children into care at an earlier stage. It later emerged that an attempt had been made to take the children into care in 2000 but a Catholic right wing group paid for the mother to fight the case in the High Court.

for jobs in the city (Ahmed, January 2009). This is something that Franklin and Parton warned of almost 20 years ago.

Persistently negative appraisals of Social work means morale within the profession suffers to the extent where some authorities are now facing critical difficulties in recruiting Social work staff (1991: 32).

The primary aim of the research was to explore the attitudes of social workers towards media portrayals of the profession and to discover whether their work practices were influenced or affected by the media.

### **Methods and Methodology**

Qualitative methods are ‘inherently inductive; they seek to discover, not test, explanatory theories’ (Padgett, 1998: 2). Qualitative techniques were used in this research, as I was interested in opinions and attitudes rather than numerical data. Padgett says that the ways in which respondents ‘view their worlds and create meaning from diverse life experiences are myriad and can best be tapped by a qualitative approach’ (1998: 11). When compared to quantitative research, qualitative research uses smaller samples (Adapted from Ritchie, 2003). Social workers are familiar with the main methods of data collection in qualitative research from their day-to-day practice. These include in-depth interviewing, observation and document review. ‘Triangulation’ means the use of different methods, which can lead to the collection of more robust information (Kane and O’Reilly-De Brún, 2001: 108). ‘There are few concepts more central to understanding (and doing) qualitative research than the concept of triangulation’ (Padgett, 1998: 32). Two main methods of research were used, desktop research in the form of a literature review and semi-structured interviews.

Compiling the literature review formed a large part of the research and helped me to reflect on the findings from other studies in the relevant areas. It also helped to construct a broader understanding of the main topics. The literature review also

contributed to the development of the analytic framework and helped to expand the research question.

Interviews can give ‘greater depth than a questionnaire’ (Kane and O’Reilly-De Brún, 2001: 206). Semi-structured rather than structured interviews were conducted, as this format allowed flexibility and the chance to gain more in-depth information. Corby (2006: 246) says that the method ‘allows researchers to derive data about the particular concerns which are the focus of their study but also gives research participants the opportunity to articulate their concerns and views’.

Non-probability sampling was used in this research. Social workers whom I had worked with while on placement were asked to participate, as it was felt that they would be more amenable to participating in the research. ‘Personal acquaintance with key respondents can smooth the way considerably’ (Padgett, 1998: 46). Six social workers from three different Child Protection and Welfare social work teams in HSE South participated in the research. Four interviewees are female and two are male. Two interviewees have children and one is a step parent. Their average length of experience in the area of child protection is 3.25 years. All of the interviews took place in the participants’ work settings, as qualitative methods are ‘naturalistic, favouring in-vivo observations’ (Padgett, 1998: 2). The issue of confidentiality was discussed and participants were assured that their names would be changed. I also offered to provide the interviewees with transcripts of their own interviews.

### ***Limitations of Research***

Corby warns that qualitative methods ‘run the risk of being highly selective’ (2006: 151). Höijer (cited in Röhle, 2005: 408) argues that reliability, validity and ‘generalisability’, three methodological criteria usually ascribed only to quantitative studies, should also be considered in qualitative research. A small sample was used in this research, therefore the results cannot presume to represent the views of all social workers. However, I felt that generalisability was worth sacrificing ‘in favour of obtaining a rich and complex understanding about the particular situation under study’ (Mark, 1998: 213).

The research would have been strengthened by the use of a third research method such as a focus group, however this was deemed to be impractical due to time constraints.

### **Lessons from the Literature**

#### ***Wimps or Bullies; How the Media Portray Social workers***

The media play a large part in forming public opinion. As Parton puts it: ‘the media have the power to transform the private into the public’ (Parton, 2006: 53). There is a wealth of literature regarding social workers’ concern with its depiction in the media (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Aldridge, 1990; Davenport and Davenport, 1997; McNulty, 2007). The media’s interest in Child Protection social work can be traced back to the death of Maria Colwell in 1973. Franklin and Parton found that the sheer scale of media reporting and the manner in which the media made a scapegoat of the social worker was new and created a precedent (1991: 11).

In a review of media stories about social work and social workers, Franklin and Parton identified the two main stereotypical images of social workers as ‘fools and wimps’ (Franklin and Parton, 1991: 16) or ‘villains and bullies’ (ibid: 19). Irish social workers in Buckley’s study felt that their work was being driven by ‘politicians and the media,’ (Buckley, 1999: 36).

#### ***Legislation by Tabloid***

Of course, there are positive aspects to media coverage; McNulty claims that the media ‘have been essential to the growth of society’s awareness of child abuse and neglect’ (2007: 126). The media has been instrumental in calling for public inquiries to be held in the cases of fatal child abuse and neglect. Reder *et al.* refer to the 1970s and 1980s as a new phase in the history of child abuse with the ‘explosions of public inquiries into certain cases of fatal abuse’ (1993: 17). Between the Colwell Inquiry (1973/74) and 1990, there were approximately forty more inquiries into fatal child abuse in the U.K. These inquiries were usually set up as a result of public concern, which was often fuelled by media interest.

As Adcock (1989, cited in Reder *et al.*, 1993: 18) pointed out, public inquiries have often led to major changes in the law. A number of high profile abuse cases during the 1990s led to a ‘radicalisation’ of the Irish child protection system (Ferguson, 1996). These changes were long overdue, but developed more from a ‘political reaction to particular inquiries and high profile scandals than from any coherent reform agenda’ (McNulty, 2007: 126).

Inquiry panels, in general, have tended to focus their investigations on professional practice and therefore the social, cultural or psychological circumstances surrounding the child’s death are often absent from the reports. In an examination of these inquiries, Munro found that social workers were absolved of blame in 42% of reports. She also found however, that the media paid more attention to the inquiries that ‘castigated’ professionals and less to the ones that ‘exonerated’ them, ‘fostering an image of all deaths being preventable if only all professionals acted competently’ (Munro in Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004: 76). She found that in media reporting of inquiries, social workers were ‘repeatedly singled out for blame’ (*ibid*).

Reder *et al.* were also concerned that public inquiries help to sustain the unreal belief that all child abuse and child manslaughter would be preventable if professionals would act to abolish it (1993: 18). Franklin and Parton found that scapegoating ‘misdirects attention and obscures the possibilities for analysing the root causes of abuse’ (1991: 26).

Hallett (1989) states that inquiries can be used as a political tool to alleviate public anxiety after a child abuse tragedy. The blame then shifts onto the individual and ‘political responsibility for the child-protection system, its modes of operation, its legislative framework and its resources would largely escape public scrutiny’ (Hallett, 1989: 144). Parton (1985) suggests that the media reporting of a child being severely abused or killed causes a ‘moral panic.’ When these tragedies happen, outcries in the media lead to social workers becoming the target of public upset and rage. This massive outpouring of anger seems to diminish public concern and the problems of

child abuse and neglect then fade from social consciousness until the next tragedy happens.

### ***How Social Workers are Affected by the Media***

‘Social workers themselves read, view and listen to the media along with other members of the general public and are not immune to the effects of their messages’ (Franklin and Parton, 1991: 32). Child Protection and Welfare social work is a stressful occupation, and social workers working in the area often face severe emotional and psychological pressures (Laming, 2009: 32). In an era where higher standards are expected, yet fewer resources are available, it is no surprise that morale and confidence are suffering, even without the added pressure from the media. Negative media coverage of social work has been shown to cause problems in the areas of job retention, funding and recruitment. ‘Morale has fallen, the quality of practice has deteriorated, and there are major problems in recruiting and training staff’ (Munro in Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004: 76).

In the Irish context, McNulty, (In Burns and Lynch (eds.) 2008) carried out a qualitative study to examine the image of social work in print and consider how those engaged in Irish Child Protection and Welfare social work perceive their representation in the press. All participants in her study thought that the public were influenced by media coverage of Social work (ibid: 130), and had a negative image of social workers as a result.

A recent poll carried out by the Local Government Association (U.K.) found that two in five people say their opinion of Child Protection social workers has gotten worse since the tragic case of ‘Baby P’ (Smith, 2009). Research carried out by Franklin (1998) in the U.K. shows that social workers often feel demoralized by the constant criticism and distortion of social services by the media. Moore identified the feelings of ‘omnipotence/ impotence, anger / guilt, depression /accusation.’ She said these feelings affect the worker to the extent where they become ‘like a rabbit trapped in headlights’ (Moore in Pritchard (ed.) 1995: 56). She also found that social workers

were often overcome by ‘the sort of guilt that encourages criticism even to the point where the worker is seen as the murderer’ (ibid).

Zugazaga found that the exposure to negative images of their profession can have ‘noxious effects on professional self-image as well as job performance’ (2005: 1). It is no wonder then that social workers within Child Protection and Welfare social work lack motivation and confidence, yet Laming warns that ‘without highly motivated and confident social workers the reality is that more children will be exposed to harm’ (ibid: 45).

### **Discussion of Findings**

Interviewees were first asked about their experience of Child Protection social work and questions about their experience of neglect cases were asked. Questions about media coverage of social work and attitudes towards the media formed the main part of the interviews. A few questions about the IASW were asked to ascertain social workers’ views on the organization that represents them.

Several themes emerged during the interviews. These are summarized under four headings: Social workers’ views on media portrayal of social work, How social workers are affected by the media, Implications for practice and Coping mechanisms used by social workers

### ***Social Workers Views on how the Media Portray Social Work***

When questioned about the media, all interviewees agreed that the media portrayal of social work is overwhelmingly negative. Five of the six interviewees felt that they were affected negatively by media reporting of social work, both on personal and professional levels. When examining the impact of child abuse inquiries, Munro found that: ‘Public interest is aroused only by certain types of adverse outcomes’ (Munro in Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004: 75). Her observation was borne out in this research.

I don't think I've ever seen a positive report about social workers and the good work they do... that's not going to sell papers so they're not interested...[Róisín]

The two most recent high-profile cases, 'Baby P' and the 'Roscommon Incest Case' were discussed during some of the interviews. McNulty highlighted how 'child protection workers rather than abusers can appear in press reports as the major threat to children' (2007: 127). Her finding was reiterated in this study by [Andrew] who stated:

even with the case in England [Baby P] you could look at the social worker and the social work department and the failings there...I think they were almost blamed more than the people who had committed the abuse... like the parent.

All interviewees believed that the media depicts social workers in a negative way. Every respondent felt that the main attitude in the media is that of the social worker as the 'child snatcher'

we're seen as gullible baby snatchers and not as statutory agents with responsibility for protecting children [Joe]

The interviewees also agreed that media stories were often inaccurate and did not give all the facts.

with the Roscommon case... the media give the impression that we can just call to a house and take a child into care like that [clicks fingers] [April]

The situation was put most succinctly by [Andrew] who stated:

With all that type of coverage...nobody really comes down to the basic facts of why this happened and how can we not let it happen again...it's all blame whoever ... it's a singular persons problem it's not seen as a system problem and that's why it will happen again

### *How Social Workers are Affected by the Media*

Only one of the interviewees claimed not to be affected by negative media coverage.

I suppose the more experience you have and the more comfortable you get with the work you are doing, you don't really get affected by it... [April]

The other interviewees felt that negative media coverage of the profession has an impact on professional relationships with teachers, doctors and public health nurses, confirming the results of Horwath and Saunders' 2005 study, and Franklin and Parton's findings: 'Media criticisms also influence attitudes towards social workers amongst related professional groups' (1991: 32).

the negative image that social workers have does make our job difficult with the public, even dealing with teachers and nurses... they think we're all out to take the children into care... it makes our job very difficult [Róisín]

On a personal level, the impact on morale was mentioned in several interviews:

It can be demoralizing ... like you'd feel afraid to do anything nearly ... and I suppose as a group...we don't have a positive voice in the media [Mary]

Two of the social workers were quite adamant that they would not tell people what they do for a living.

people don't really know what social work is about...their understanding of social work is what they read in the papers and so I just don't want to get into it with people [Róisín]

This lack of pride in the profession struck me as quite alarming, particularly as the social workers in question were only qualified for three and five years respectively.

The main impact of the media on their professional lives was the way in which practice had become defensive. As one participant put it:

It's actually to the detriment of the families that you're working with because you're so busy writing everything up that it's taking time away from the therapeutic side of it [Stacey]

### *Implications for Practice*

Franklin and Parton found evidence that the media do have ‘an impact on day to day social work practice’ and that it ‘can be pervasive...many social workers were fearful of being ‘found wanting’ and made to account publicly for their actions’ (1991: 31).

The social workers interviewed all felt that neglect is an extremely serious issue:

neglect is the worst...and the emotional abuse...the name calling...putting the child down [Joe]

because neglect is a cyclical thing, it keeps on going...its interfamilial...it keeps on going to the next generation and on and on and it causes chronic socialization problems [Róisín]

Due to the current economic climate social work teams are working with diminished resources. When media report on a neglect or child abuse case, it makes the public more aware of these issues and the social work department receives an increased amount of referrals.

After Roscommon...the neglect became very public...specifically around the area of the head lice...now we are getting 2-3 calls a day from principals of schools about children having head lice or children having no food or about children looking dirty [Joe]

There are simply not enough social workers to go around, so cases are prioritized by the Team Leader. Sexual and physical abuse cases usually take precedence over the neglect cases which often results in the neglect cases being filtered out of the system.

I suppose we have such a high level of caseloads that sometimes the priority is to the severe physical abuse ...the sexual abuse [Stacey]

I don't think that social workers in general consider neglect less of an issue...it's just with high workloads other cases just get pushed to the fore [Andrew]

One participant had very strong views that negative public attitudes lead to social work being reactive to crises instead of being preventative.

If people would consider that the social work department could be used as a resource rather than a punitive measure... then maybe preventative stuff could be done and that might prevent a child coming into care two years down the line. [Joe]

Reder and Duncan agreed that social workers' approach to practice 'inevitably became defensive' (Reder and Duncan in Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004: 94). The theme of defensive practice came up in most of the interviews.

it's a risky job in that you're dealing with people's lives and sometimes things can go terribly wrong ...you always try and cover yourself in case an investigation ever happens [Róisín]

Oh cover your back...cover your back at all costs, absolutely [Andrew]

### ***Coping Mechanisms Employed by Social Workers in the Study***

[I]t's intense work...it's like an A & E department in here, going from crisis to crisis unfortunately that's the way it is at the moment...[Stacey]

When asked in what ways they coped with the negative aspects of their work and the media criticisms, the need for supervision came up in most of the interviews.

I think that even goes back to supervision and you know, peer support with your colleagues [Mary]

good supervision is crucial at that point and when supervision is working at its best...that can heal itself when it's working at its best [Andrew]

Laming identified supervision as being crucial to good practice. 'Regular, high-quality, organized supervision is critical' (Laming, 2009: 32). This research highlighted a lack of consistency in the provision of supervision between Child Protection and Welfare social work teams. Social workers in the study reported that supervision can be ad-hoc in some teams.

you go off and you make all these decisions or whatever and you don't get to debrief or run things by somebody and say 'well this is what I did...should I

have done it this way?' ...and then your accountability could be called into question [Mary]

One team however had a very positive experience of supervision and identified this as helping them to cope with the pressures of the job including media criticisms.

We do peer supervision here...particularly on cases that might be very strenuous and we'd all discuss it and we'd all help each other out in different ways [Joe]

Laming's report also found an absence of reflection among social work teams, and was concerned that: 'the tradition of deliberate, reflective social work practice is being put in danger because of an overemphasis on process and targets, resulting in a loss of confidence amongst social workers' (Laming, 2009: 32).

Only one of the social workers in this study mentioned the importance of reflective practice.

I think if people look to their social work training and look back at reflective practice, I think that is crucial [Joe]

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, I found that the media does have an effect on individual social workers. Their work practices and the manner in which they deal with Child Protection and Welfare cases are affected by the media. When cases such as the 'Roscommon Case' are reported in the media, it leads to an increase in the number of referrals, but no increase in resources. This indirectly leads to neglect cases being filtered out of the system. Defensive practice and 'covering your back' are deemed to have come about as a direct result of media scrutiny. More time is spent on paperwork than on doing therapeutic work with children in need.

The social workers interviewed also felt that they are soft targets for the media to scapegoat because of confidentiality and HSE rules about speaking to the media. The lack of a strong organisation speaking up for social workers was also a recurring theme within the interviews, put most succinctly by [Mary]:

It's like the voiceless speaking for the voiceless

***Recommendations***

- There appears to be a need for social work departments to have a dedicated press officer, who could engage with the media and broaden the public perception of social work.
- The IASW needs to become more proactive both in recruiting members and in engaging with the press.
- All of the participants in this study mentioned the need for social workers to find their own voices and to advocate for themselves. A stronger emphasis on politics and policy within the four year BSW course may help with this.
- It is only when social workers stand up for themselves that they will be neither scapegoats nor sacrificial lambs.

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