WORLD SOCIAL WORK DAY ASSIGNMENT

SWU Social Workers Union

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Competition marked by a Panel including:
Shahid Naqvi - PSW Magazine Editor
David Callow - SWU Executive
Lindsey Huxtable-Dowd - BASW/SWU Advice and Representation Team

The criteria: a 750 - 1000 word assignment with the following title:

Considering the current negative TV and general media portrayals of social workers, what action can be taken to change this?

Who could take part: Social Work Students undertaking an Undergraduate or Post Graduate Social Work Degree

The prize: £500

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Considering the current negative TV and general media portrayals of social workers, what action can be taken to change this?

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Recent news coverage has repeatedly emphasised the shortcomings of social work professionals and the limitations of social work resources that, consequently, have contributed to several serious and chilling events in recent years, including child deaths (Leedham, 2022). The more recent deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, coupled with the historic cases of Victoria Climbié, Baby P, and many other individuals both in the UK and internationally shook the nation (Curtis, 2022). The failure of those with legal powers and duty substantially weakened the already fragile position of social work (Gallagher, 2022).

Negative and sensationalistic depictions of social work in the media have been present since at least the 1970s (Neate and Philpot, 1997) and have had a serious impact on the public perception of social workers, and have influenced national legislation, especially pieces focusing on child safety and protection (Franklin and Parton, 2014). The 1975 and 1989 Children's Acts are examples of legislation that came out as a direct consequence of the Cleveland and Colwell cases, where children died due to the neglect and violence (Valios, 2007).

Current professional challenges including large workloads, insufficient funds to support professionals with more time and the space and understanding they require to act with more efficacy and diligence sadly means there has been inevitable societal disappointment and an increasingly negative perception of social workers (Legood et al., 2016). Such strong feelings of anger and disappointment are enrooted in the common belief that social workers are to be held responsible for such terrible mistakes. These common societal beliefs and the existing stigma of social workers are compounded by the characterisation in the media that define their role as to interfere with families and 'take children away' (Bolgun and Sahin, 2019).

Therefore, it comes without surprise that due to such repeated stigma and pressure from the care providers and governments, along with the day-to-day stresses of overwhelming casework, social workers are not only overloaded with responsibility but also subjected to a continuous string of negativity and scrutiny coming from the news (Mason, 2018).

The media has contributed to a negative image of social work and its emphasis on any wrongdoing and professional neglect, particularly children's services, offers a generalised, badly informed, and skewed picture of what social workers do (Davidson and King, 2005). Such unbalanced images of the profession and social work professionals suggests that not much is known about the reality of the job, its variety, diversity of roles and responsibilities (Galilee, 2001; Kagan, 2015).

Because media sources are a main contributor to the negative perception of social work, it has created an unfair image of the profession, particularly amongst those who do not have any personal experiences of social work services (Legood et al., 2016). Media limits the growth of the understanding of the profession, however, keeping in mind media's power that leads to 'a widespread influence over public attitudes and beliefs' (Staniforth et al., 2022, p.244), social work professionals should consider taking action to change negative perceptions in three following ways.

First, on a micro-level, social workers both nationally and worldwide need to take charge of changing the skewed image of the profession (LeCroy and Stinton, 2004). A more active involvement on social media through the sharing of positive and successful stories would provide an opportunity for a more balanced opinion of social work (Jahan, 2016). Furthermore, considering an educational approach in such stories, including successful examples of excellent social work in a diverse setting, would be helpful to those who are unfamiliar with the complexity and variety of the profession. For instance, an Instagram account, Blog, YouTube channel, Vlog and/or podcast could be set up to promote the work of diverse teams and individuals. That would not only be informative but would be able to reach out to the younger demographic.

Second, on a mezzo-level, strong research-based initiative must be encouraged by social work departments, statutory and non-statutory organisations, and educational bodies. Conducting research in social work not only allows the development of new theories and improvement of practices and interventions (Jahan, 2016), but it also enhances the status of social work amongst other professionals and academics. The new research initiative could be shared, discussed, and evaluated within local research hubs (Local Authority or NHS Trust -based) and subsequently shared nationwide via conferences, social media, and online seminars.

These initiatives should be aimed not only at the professionals but also open to the public interested in what social workers do and how and why they do it. That would also offer room for co-production of services and dialogue amongst practitioners, service users and governing bodies (Legood et al., 2016). New research initiatives, as well as excellent examples of practice, could be subsequently shared with local and national media and press. Social media, including Instagram, LinkedIn or Twitter should be used regularly to promote research and any examples of excellent practice (Westwood, 2014).

On a macro-level, Social Work Education's curricula, as well as national policies, must develop and promote an array of skills necessary to positively inform and influence media and public opinion (Legood et al., 2016). Students and professionals need to be trained to co-work effectively with media and establish a fair and balanced working relations that would help illustrate both the challenges and the successes coming from social work profession (Westwood, 2014).

By doing this, social work's status will improve, the public will gain a wider view of social workers' duties and consequently, that will overall lead to a better perception of social work. However, for this to be possible, there must be a strong governmental 'push' for fairer working conditions and social funding allowing social workers perform at the best of their ability (British Association of Social Workers, 2021). Without investment in social work education, professional skills as well as fairer pay, it would be impossible to create innovative tools to adequately work with and stand up to the media's skewed depictions of social work (Staniforth et al., 2022). Only a strong co-productive approach and initiative between social workers, service users and media representatives can transform an overly unfavourable representation of social work profession.

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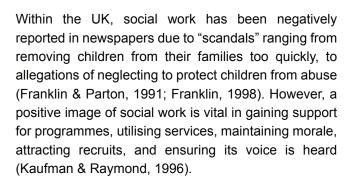
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Considering the current negative TV and general media portrayals of social workers, what action can be taken to change this?

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Within the UK, social work has been negatively reported in newspapers due to "scandals" ranging from removing children from their families too quickly, to allegations of neglecting to protect children from abuse (Franklin & Parton, 1991; Franklin, 1998). However, a positive image of social work is vital in gaining support for programmes, utilising services, maintaining morale, attracting recruits, and ensuring its voice is heard (Kaufman & Raymond, 1996).

The media serves to further discussions among the public and policy makers regarding particular public health issues (Wallack et al., 1993). From the 1970s – 1990s a series of high profile child abuse scandals in England and Wales led to the frequent vilification of the child welfare agencies considered to be to blame for the deaths of the children involved by the mass media (Ayre, 2001). The negative, and on occasion hostile, media reports of social workers became more apparent in the late 1980s after the reports from the Beckford, Henry, Carlisle and Cleveland inquiries occurred, where social workers were centrally involved (Franklin and Parton, 1991). The 1987 "Cleveland Affair" story was the first case of over-intervention rather than under-intervention, leading to professionals being characterised as "fools and whimps" for failing to intervene authoritatively in the name of protection, and "villain and bully," for heavy-handed intervention and placing children in care unnecessarily (Lonne and Patton, 2014). These images have been portrayed in the media ever since. Scandals are the single largest category of story and these cases within social work have become national news, often with multiple follow-up stories and leading to the fostering of a journalistic

propensity to see social work in a bad light (Reid and Misener, 2001). The selection of news stories emphasising drama and conflict can only increase the atmosphere of mistrust, with the key news stories of 1970s - 1990s tending to focus on criticism of the competency or motivations of child protection workers (Ayre, 2001). Little to no attention tends to be paid to regular small successes of the social work system in identifying abuse and preventing serious injury or death (Pritchard, 1992). This media portrayal supports the belief within the British social work community that "the profession gets unusually poor news media treatment" (Aldridge, 1990).

Within the social work role difficult judgements must be made and these can unfortunately lead to harmful consequences (SCIE, 2005). However, as a social care sector, the lessons from these mistakes only occur under the most tragic of circumstances and this can raise intense public condemnation, resulting in a blame culture with blame aimed at the 'guilty' professionals (Sicora, 2017). An example of this can be seen with The Sun's "Beautiful Baby P: Campaign for Justice" petition with its success leading to the dismissal of four employees connected to the case (Lonne and Paton, 2014). The media have played a key role in creating and maintaining the discourse that professionals are to blame for the abuse which they are supposed to prevent, coming out in the form of 'how has this been allowed to happen?' (Ayre, 2001). However, a false solution is represented by blame and punishment of individual professionals and does not solve the real issues (Sicora, 2017).

Initiatives in the improvement of the portrayal of Social Work in the press should be seen as a feature of maximising the effectiveness of the profession (Reid and Misener, 2001). Recognition and a response to the roles that the media plays is needed, whilst also questioning how Social Work relates to the media (Lonne and Parton, 2014). Social Workers have felt journalists lack sufficient knowledge to report matters accurately whilst some journalists have encouraged the adoption of a proactive public relations strategy (Franklin and Parton, 1991). Often the media are treated as hostile towards Social Work and thus a lack of co-operation with press inquiries and a failure to offer background information or offer the availability of a credible spokesperson to interview leaves the media with large gaps in the narrative of their story (Ayre, 2001). An on-going media strategy should include the promotion of the successes and socially valued aspects of the profession and form long-term relationships with journalists (Aldridge, 1994). Understanding of the complexities and uncertainties involved in child welfare for example on the part of journalists may result in a more objective report with less blame culture generated (Reid and Misener, 2001). A panel of experts as a resource for the media such as The National Association of Social Workers in the USA may provide a link for the media to gain more inside knowledge on the profession (Reid and Misener, 2001). Rather than avoiding the media, it is crucial to increase the understanding of the media and the creation of news, whilst also increasing the effectiveness of the creation and promotion of Social Works preferred discourse (Ayre, 2001). Aspects of the media management of the police forces in the United Kingdom can be learned from, with their anticipation of a possibly controversial story breaking and thus responding by providing neutral or favourable background information to the news leading to quick and positive responses rather than defensive ones (Ayre, 2001). The key that they employ is maintaining a steady stream of stories customised to account for the needs of different media sectors and cultivate specific journalists who are sympathetic to the chosen message (Ayre, 2001). More generally, stories about innovative programmes or interesting practice activities could be created in co-operation with journalists seeking newsworthy articles (Reid and Misener, 2001).

The current negative general media portrayals of social workers has occurred off the back of multiple child protection scandals. The culture of blame that has resulted from these scandals and the public condemnation of individual professionals has been maintained by the media's attention to blaming someone for why a tragic circumstance has occurred. However, through a strong media strategy, the promotion of the preferred discourse, and increased positive relationships with the media professionals the story may be altered.

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Considering the current negative TV and general media portrayals of social workers, what action can be taken to change this?

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"Baby murdered hours after social worker's visit."

"Half of all social workers at risk of quitting."

"Social workers turned blind eye to abuse."

These are some of the headlines that come up when the term "social workers" is inputted into Google News. The negative slants of these headlines may not come as a surprise to social workers, with research indicating that this common and negative portrayal has an effect on their morale (Zugazaga et al., 2006). These types of headlines, alongside negative television portrayals and even Facebook groups devoted to maligning social workers, present damning pictures of social workers to the general public and can deter individuals from wanting to become social workers themselves.

It seems as though social work is only mentioned in the media when something negative and rare, such as child abuse resulting in death, has happened, negatively impacting the reputation of social workers in this field (Lonne and Parton, 2014). One example is the recent case of Logan Mwangi in Bridgend, who was discharged from the Child Protection Register only a month before his death (Pollock, 2022). Other notable cases include the murders of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. The result of the extensive media coverage of these cases can be hostile attitudes towards social workers (Warner, 2012).

Instead of waiting for another case to end tragically or for another media investigation on the worsening social work staffing crisis, it is time to do damage control and change the narrative. We must cast the spotlight on the good that social workers achieve and the positive aspects of the social work role. This may then encourage people to seek support from social workers and alleviate recruitment pressures into the sector.

However, we cannot attempt damage control when so many people are unclear about what social work actually consists of. In undertaking research for my Masters dissertation, I conducted interviews with individuals, through which it came out that many of them did not actually understand what social work entailed. This discovery reflects research indicating the public appears to typecast social workers as do-gooders and hippies and are unaware about the qualifications needed to practice as one (Beddoe et al., 2017). Members of the public may benefit from greater education about the social work role, which will hopefully alleviate the stigma resulting from seeking support. This education may also prevent people from only speaking to social workers when at crisis, alleviating pressures on the sector. This preventative support, which is a crucial element of social care as evidenced by the Code of Professional Practice and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, also leads to better person-centred care.

By educating the general population about various social work functions, we can also hopefully demonstrate that the Climbiés in social work are rare, with the current rate of fatal abuse being 2.2/100000 and 1.8/100000 for boys and girls respectively (McCarroll et al., 2020). We can also evidence how we support the older adult population in the midst of the current NHS crisis. In this way, the focus shifts from child protection gone wrong to how social workers actually benefit members of the public and promote their well-being (Beddoe, 2013).

Sharing information about our roles through social media and news sites would be beneficial, but it is important to be realistic and realise that comments underneath articles, especially by those readers consider to be peers, may have a chance of being negative. These comments can then influence these readers and deter from the message we are trying to send to the general public (Krämer et al., 2019). Media portrayal via television, for example on BBC networks, may also be beneficial for those who prefer not to access the internet.

Community outreach information sessions may also be effective as this would enable the general public to speak face-to-face with people. I recently supported the local authority hosting my placement to conduct 'Carers Roadshows.' This entailed setting up a booth in the middle of a busy town market to support any unpaid

carers happening to stop by with information on how they could access support and what they may be entitled to. This seemed to be effective for several families who did not realise how social workers could support them in their roles.

They also had the benefit of speaking to other professionals, such as benefits advisors and carers support workers, to better have an idea of what other support is available. Many of these individuals appeared to be older, who also explained to us that they were not confident in accessing internet resources. For this reason these types of events may reach an audience not accessible through traditional television and internet methods.

Speaking to social workers in this way also humanises them as some people have had negative experiences with social workers. I have worked with adults who have advised me that the child protection social workers they have come across in the past have appeared very punitive and that they were afraid of being penalised for having, for example, mental health issues. Transparency surrounding the role and to remove the stereotypes associated with the role may help through an information session.

None of these suggestions will wipe the stigma that is associated with the social work role, with research indicating that some social workers believe that negative views of the role will dominate the discourse even with evidence indicating the contrary (Legood, 2016). However, through community outreach and education surrounding the social care role, we can make a dent in the negative portrayals which currently surround social work and positively impact our local communities at the same time.

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