

‘Social workers dismissed concerns’: A corpus-assisted discourse study of the portrayal of a profession in UK newspapers

Maria Leedham

The Open University, UK



Outline

- 1) Social work in UK newspapers
- 2) Method
- 3) Findings:
- 4) Summary and implications



Background



Morning [UNKNOWN8],

I will try and answer some, if not all of your questions:

I, or [CCW1] are more than happy to consider nursing home costs, and telephone care homes in [SU009a]'s usual residential area to gain an idea of funding and costs etc. I understand that additional funding was considered by the area team [MGR1] for a residential placement previously, therefore there may be an argument that the same should be considered for a nursing home placement. However this is all a little previous, until we know costs and have narrowed down the search. I note (with thanks) that family are not able to contribute a top up fee. Therefore care home with little, or no top up would usually be considered first. Clearly we would try and argue (if additional funding is required) to keep [SU009a] in his local area in the first instance.

to remain in hospital until the DSI... then this was an Adult Social Care worker (Social Worker), I lead the meeting), Staff Nurse from the ward representative (family, NOK, friend or advocate) if the meeting/decision. Any other parties could be me know if you require any other professionals unlikely that a Consultant would attend, due to

and Nursing Assessment when [SU009a] is stable was not done before the NG was removed. The completing the checklist, nor are they required to consent about the scoring if asked, and volunteer for a copy of the CHNC and Nursing Assessment, or permission (confidentiality of patient), as this is a patient advocate should always be present at the meeting to engage in the decision.

I completely understand that Fully Funded Healthcare, and palliative care, would be your preferred

Hi Alison,

How about if we meet up on Wednesday pm to discuss this further?

Dr Marie Leedham
Chair of "Exploring English grammar" (E304); Co-I on "Writing in professional Social work Practice in a changing Communicative landscape" (WISP)
Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and English Language Studies



Photos: John Birdsall

Social workers in the UK press

History

- 1973 – Maria Colwell death
- 1970s, 80s, 90s - Climate of fear, blame and mistrust (Ayre, 2001)
- 2007 - ‘Baby P’ – Peter Connelly case - ‘[i]ntensely hostile media coverage and political reaction’ (Warner, 2013:1638)
- 2008-2010 – Child sex abuse scandals uncovered in Rochdale, Oxford and Rotherham

So...

- Largely negative portrayal - Especially in child protection (e.g. Reid & Misener, 2001; Warner, 2013)
- Social workers are in the news when a case goes wrong
- Accountability & ‘blame culture’ – from press and public (Munro, 2010)
- Influences how the public view SWs, and how SWs view themselves
- Important as many social workers thinking of leaving (56%, acc. to Community Care survey, 2019)



Previous studies and literature

- Franklin (1998) – UK newspapers ‘overwhelmingly negative and critical’
- Ayre (2001) – focus on scandals within child protection
- Penhale and Young (2015) – positive stories ‘comparatively rare’
- Comparative studies suggest UK press are more severe on individuals (e.g. Lonne and Parton’s comparison of press coverage in the UK and Australia, 2014; Reid and Misener’s comparison of the UK and US, 2001).
- Franklin & Parton (2014) – 2 types of SW failure:
 - ‘failure to intervene where children had died’ and removing children from their families ‘on the basis of flimsy evidence’ (Parton, 2014:2048)
- the ‘cultural scapegoats’ for society (Parton, 2014:2049)



Research aims

- 1) What are the proportions of positive, negative and neutral mentions of *social worker(s)* in the UK press?
- 2) What are the dominant subcategories within each of these three groups?
- 3) How are social workers affected by press coverage of their profession?

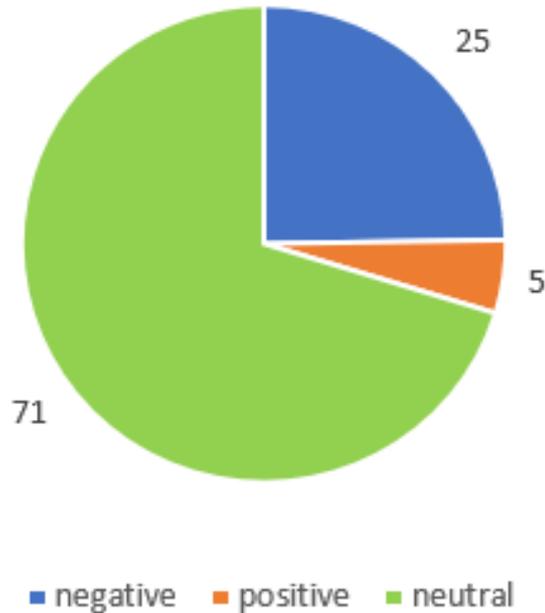


Method

- SWP19 - a corpus of 3 months of articles from Nexis-UK seeded around *social worker**
- Almost 1000 occurrences in 736 articles (5.1m words)
- Removal of duplicates – 974 remaining
- Manual thematic analysis - categorisation as ‘positive’, ‘negative’, or ‘neutral’ using WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2019)
- 91% intra-rater reliability
- Subcategorisation through iterative rereading and sorting, employing substantial co-text
- Semantic categorisation of SWP2019 using WMatrix (Rayson, 2009)
- Note: study looks at individual occurrences and classifies these. Previous studies classified whole articles
- Secondary dataset of 8 interviews with social workers (from WiSP (Writing in professional social work www.writinginsocialwork.com, Lillis et al., 2019)



Findings: categorisation of 974 lines (%)



- Both men had histories of domestic violence, crime and drug use, yet *social workers* dismissed concerns and did not intervene. [The Daily Telegraph, 07/06/19]
- A High Court judge has praised the tireless "coalface work" carried out by *social workers* on behalf of vulnerable children. [The Independent, 11/05/19]
- Smith was given a community payback order which will see him supervised by *social workers* for 12 months [mirror.co.uk, 24/07/10]



Classification: neutral

- 655 instances (71% of total)

1) Smith was given a community payback order which was supervised by *social workers* for 12 months, [...] [mirror.co.uk, 24/01/19]

Doing their job

2) Doctors, teachers, social workers, community activists and police officers came together [thetimes.co.uk, 28/01/19]

Job title

3) It plays an important role in introducing new *social work* Signs of Safety framework

Training

4) She "finally found her calling" when she started training as a *social worker*, [...] [The Guardian, 07/05/19]

Dream job



Classification: positive

- 45 instances (5% of total)

1) A High Court judge has praised the tireless "co
out by *social workers* on behalf of vulnerable children
11/05/19]

Praise from a
judge

2) But Kalpana Thakur, a women's rights activist and
said the statistics indicated the killing of female teachers
Telegraph, 25/07/19]

SW as expert

3) But the 29-year-old centre back can put the
perspective because he is used to overcoming numerous
job as a *social worker*. [Daily Mail, 24/07/19]

Effective individual

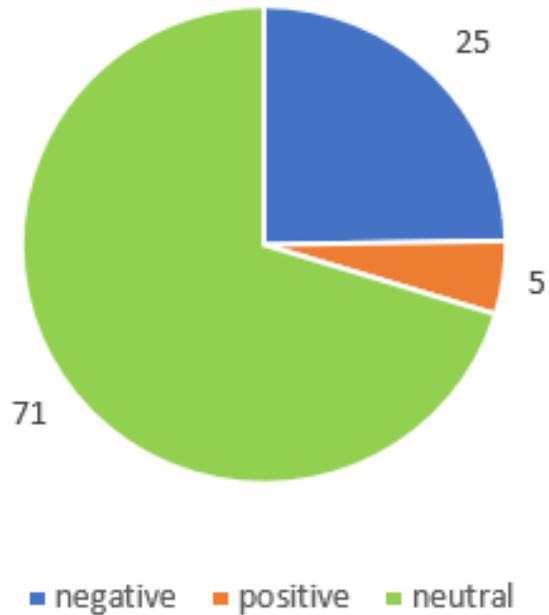
4) Our *social worker* was amazing and had a child
the start [Daily Mirror, 16/06/19]

Praise from
service user

Members of the public will 'hold a distinct and more positive view of an individual social worker' even if the negative overall impression of the group endures (Legood et.al., 2016:1886)

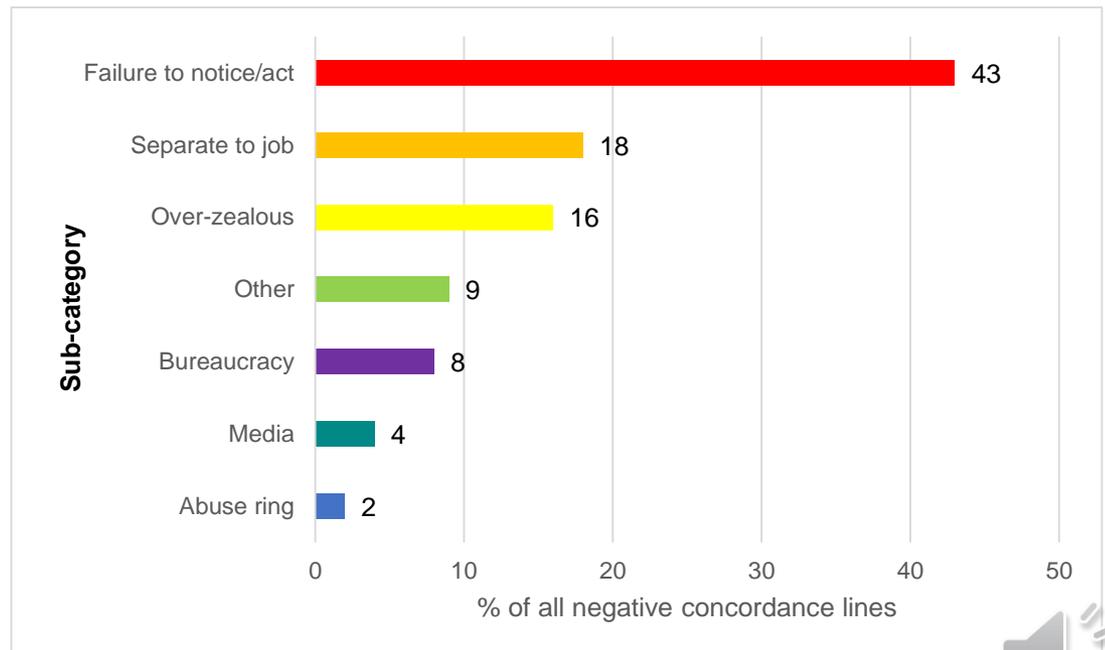
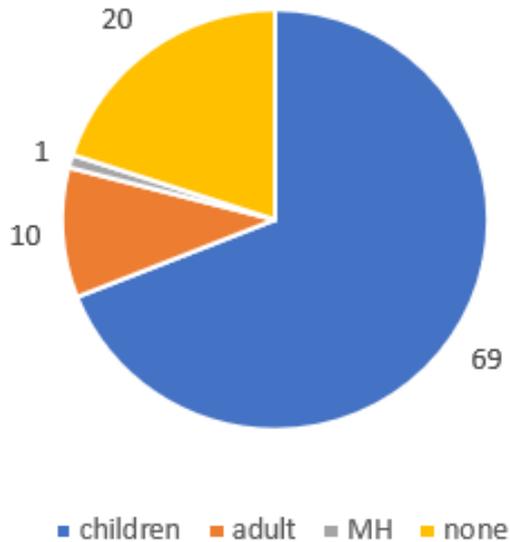


Findings: categorisation of 974 lines (%)



Classification: negative

- 241 occurrences (25% of total)



Classification: negative – failure to notice/act

- 1) Both men had histories of domestic violence, crime and drug use, yet *social workers* dismissed concerns and did not intervene. [The Daily Telegraph, 07/06/19]
- 2) *SOCIAL workers* and teachers were facing serious questions last night after a county lines gang plucked 25 boys and girls from care homes and units for expelled pupils to sell drugs 70 miles away. [dailymail.co.uk, 13/05/19]
- 3) Other failings included not following up on a 14-year-old girl's disclosure of historical physical and sexual abuse, [thetimes.co.uk, 24/05/19]
- 4) And today it can be revealed that prostitute Louise Porton, 23, conned *social workers* just four days before she "squeezed the life" out of the eldest of her two baby girls. [thesun.co.uk, 02/08/19]

- Supported by semantic tagging
- Keyness of semantic grouping FAILURE, FAILING, LOSING (ref corpus: BNC written sampler).



Classification: negative – over-zealous

- 1) She felt under pressure from gardai and *social workers* in Cura, a Catholic agency, to give her baby up for adoption. [thetimes.co.uk, 16/06/19]
- 2) Fortunately, the ward manager asked to see the paperwork which proved that the baby was at risk. There wasn't any. But from then on, a *social worker* turned up at Amber's house to watch her for hours each day. [dailymail.co.uk, 11/07/19]
- 3) I was quizzed by medics and *social workers*, then made to wait for a long time; [The Guardian, 24/07/19]
- 4) The *social workers* asked me the most prying questions [The Guardian, 03/08/19]
- 5) Judge backs parents who sent four-year-old son to school in girl's uniform despite *social workers* accusing them of 'actively encouraging' their child's transgender identity [Mailonline, 10/05/19]

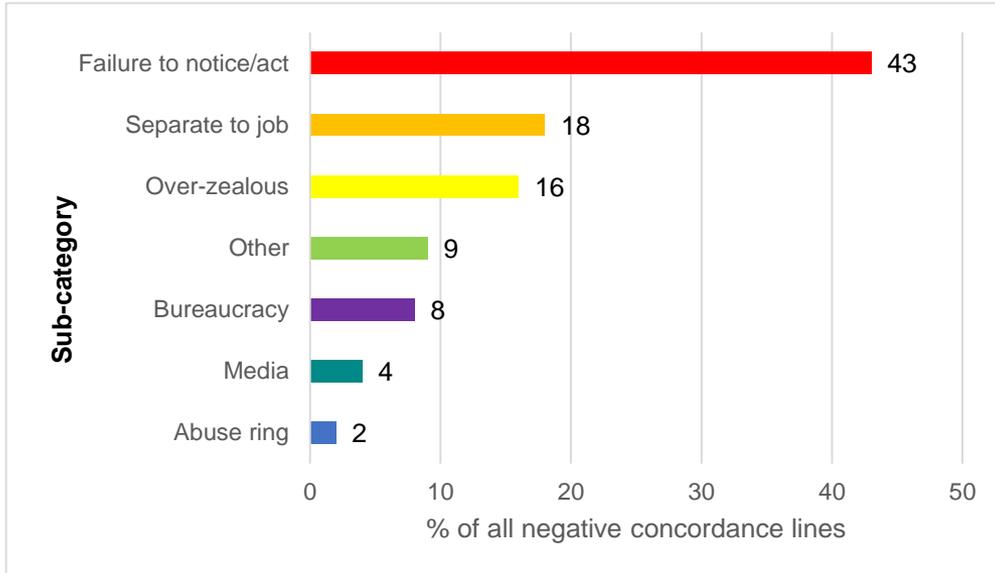


Classification: negative – over-zealous

- 1) She felt **under pressure** from gardai and *social workers* in Cura, a Catholic agency, to give her baby up for adoption. [thetimes.co.uk, 16/06/19]
- 2) Fortunately, the ward manager asked to see the paperwork which proved that the baby was at risk. There wasn't any. But from then on, a *social worker* turned up at Amber's house to **watch her for hours** each day. [dailymail.co.uk, 11/07/19]
- 3) I was **quizzed** by medics and *social workers*, then made to wait for a long time; [The Guardian, 24/07/19]
- 4) The *social workers* asked me the most **prying** questions [The Guardian, 03/08/19]
- 5) Judge backs parents who sent four-year-old son to school in girl's uniform despite *social workers* **accusing** them of 'actively encouraging' their child's transgender identity [Mailonline, 10/05/19]
- 6) Instead we have regiments of armoured paramilitary *social workers*, jingling with clubs, Tasers, pepper sprays and often guns, schooled in political dogmas and vigilant for political correctness. [dailymail.co.uk, 03/08/19]



Classification: negative



These two categories suggest social workers are held to a higher moral code than others

- 1) *Social worker* is struck off for fleecing her retiree out of more than £60,000 [...] [MailOnline, 28/06/19] *Separate to job*
- 2) And now, the *social worker* shares her bed with men and a woman, with Amelia's children even calling her 'other mother'. [Daily Mail, 14/06/19] *Separate to job*
- 3) There were no foster places available, so he was taken to a B&B on the outskirts of Chesterfield by a *social worker* for someone to tell him what to do next. [The Guardian, 26/07/19] *Bureaucratic*



Social workers' views on the press

- 8 interviewees from the WiSP project

R3: [...] And anything you can say on your social or ethnic background?

SW: I'm a typical social worker. For the benefit of the tape I'm white and I'm British and I'm wearing doc martins and I've got short hair and I read the guardian. [SW56_mh_int1]

There's huge feelings around, huge worries around being shamed in the media or being shamed by your managers because you haven't done it properly. There's all sort of like, you know issues going on around anxiety, shame and guilt that we're dealing with all the time. [...] You don't want to be put in a situation where you're open to a lot of criticism in the court arena because you will be named. I mean social workers are named in court judgements.

[...] And obviously those names can then get released into the press. Erm, the press can find out where you live. Erm, yeah, I mean it's scary. It really is so scary. [SW06_ch_int1]



Social workers' views on the press: fear of naming and shaming

N	Concordance
1	in terms of austerity, and in terms of social work after Baby P , which I think has distorted quite a lot about
2	that you have to fill in as well. And they came out after Baby P and Victoria Climbié. R3: OK SW: So the
3	issuing across the whole country has gone up since, Baby P . Year-on-year, they're up, I think, or have
4	along the way and serious case review implications, baby Peter for example was quite a crucial issue, erm,
5	I think before, if you go back to is it Climbie, or, no is it Baby Peter , where the social worker told the manager,
6	. SD: And that's in effect where we were in terms of the baby Peter era. R1: Yep SD: It was very much defensive

I think that, erm, the context in terms of austerity, and in terms of social work after Baby P, which I think has distorted quite a lot about what, erm, people see as important to record and to look for. Erm, er, I think that public perception of social workers has changed as well, erm, following that. [SW09_ch_int1]



Summary and implications

- Press mentions of *social worker** are dominated by child protection cases
- Majority of instances are neutral
- Far more negative than positive occurrences
- Social workers criticized more for *inaction* than for over-zealous behaviour (ratio of 5:2)
- Significant minority of negative occurrences concern an individual who happens to be a SW and who has behaved badly in their personal life
- Press portray SWs as individuals who should be 'good people' and hold them to a higher moral standard than the rest of us
- Press portrayal is important as likely to harm recruitment and retention to social work



References

- Ayre, P. (2001). Child Protection and the Media: Lessons from the Last Three Decades. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 31(6), 887-901. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/31.6.887
- Bisman, C. (2004). Social Work Values: The Moral Core of the Profession. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 34(1), 109-123. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bch008
- Community Care. (2019). Half of social workers consider leaving the profession for 'less stress', survey finds. Retrieved 04/02/2020, from <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/06/19/half-social-workers-consider-leaving-profession-less-stress-survey-finds/>
- Franklin, B. (1998). *Hard pressed: National newspaper reporting of social work and social services*.
- Jones, D. N. (2018). Regulation of social workers and social work in the United Kingdom: British Association of Social Workers.
- Legood, A., McGrath, M., Searle, R., & Lee, A. (2016). Exploring How Social Workers Experience and Cope with Public Perception of Their Profession. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(7), 1872-1889. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcv139
- Lillis, T., Leedham, M. and Twiner, A. (2017 © 2020) "‘If it’s not written down it didn’t happen’: contemporary writing and recording demands in social work". For *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*.
- Lillis, T., Leedham, M., & Twiner, A. (2019). Writing in social work professional practice (2014-2018). Retrieved from: <http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/853522/>
- Lonne, B., & Parton, N. (2014). Portrayals of Child Abuse Scandals in the Media in Australia and England: Impacts on Practice, Policy, and Systems: Most media coverage distorts the public understandings of the nature of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(5), 822-836. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.04.020>
- Munro, E. (2010). Learning to Reduce Risk in Child Protection. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1135-1151. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcq024
- Parton, N. (2014). Social Work, Child Protection and Politics: Some Critical and Constructive Reflections. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 2042-2056. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu091
- Penhale, B., & Young, J. (2015). A Review of the Literature Concerning What the Public and Users of Social Work Services in England Think about the Conduct and Competence of Social Workers. Norwich, UK: UEA Consulting Ltd.
- Rayson, P. (2009). Wmatrix: a web-based corpus processing environment. Lancaster: Computing Department, Lancaster University. Retrieved from <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>
- Reid, W. J., & Misener, E. (2001). Social work in the press: a cross-national study. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 10(3), 194-201. doi: 10.1111/1468-2397.00172
- Scott, M. (2019). WordSmith Tools, v.7. from <http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/version5/index.html>
- Skills for Care. (2019). Social work education 2019: Skills for care analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data: Workforce intelligence.
- Warner, J. (2013). ‘Heads Must Roll’? Emotional Politics, the Press and the Death of Baby P. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(6), 1637-1653. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bct039



Thank you

Questions/comments to:

Maria.Leedham@open.ac.uk

[@marialeedham](#)

For more on WiSP project see:

www.writinginsocialwork.com

