

The media's role in reinforcing child protection's neoliberal context: Implications for education and practice.

Barbara Staniforth
Te Kura Tauwhiro Tangata
Faculty of Education and Social Work
University of Auckland.

Research Context: Part of a suite of research projects looking at the public perception of social work.

Public perception of social work and social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand

B. Staniforth, C. Foucht and L. Beldice

The authors are all members of the School of Counselling, Human Services and Social Work at The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

Abstract

There have been limited studies that have looked at how the public perceive social workers and the profession of social work. This study reports results of a telephone survey in which 586 members of the public in Aotearoa New Zealand were asked about their beliefs and impressions about social work and social workers. Study findings demonstrate that members of the public surveyed appeared relatively well informed about what social workers do, and were generally positive in their views.

Introduction

Social work in New Zealand has undergone significant and rapid change over the 50 years since its professional body, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), was founded.¹ In that time, no large-scale studies have explored how people view social workers or the profession of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is our contention that there are several reasons why this issue is an important one to explore, including but not limited to public confidence in the profession, incentives for people to enter the profession, filling social work vacancies and funding of services.

This paper will briefly review some of the literature related to previous studies on perceptions of social work in order to establish themes and to situate this research. Findings of a recent study of members of the public in Aotearoa New Zealand will then be presented, with discussion following on the implications of these results for the profession of social work and social workers.

Literature review

A review of the literature revealed that there have been limited studies undertaken which explore how social workers and the profession of social work have been perceived. In this review the Aotearoa New Zealand research will be described specifically first, with themes emerging from the international literature following.

¹ ANZASW was initially founded in 1964 as The New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW) and changed its name to ANZASW in 2006.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Comparing public perceptions of social work and social workers' expectations of the public view

Barbara Staniforth, Kelley L. Deane and Liz Beldice University of Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Previous studies have explored public perception of social work and social workers. This article compares public perceptions of social workers from about how they, and the profession of social work, are viewed by the public. This article explores the views of a sample of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand about their beliefs around the public perception of social work and social workers.

AIMS: This article aims to explore social workers' views on the public perception of social work, and then compare these findings with a previous study which looked at the public perception of social workers.

METHODOLOGY: An online survey was conducted with 402 social workers from the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, which asked them about their perceptions on their social work and social workers are viewed by the public. The results are then compared to a previous telephone survey, which asked 586 members of the public their views on social work and social workers.

FINDINGS: Results demonstrate that the social workers generally had a greater impression of what the public believed in most areas, compared to what the public had indicated in the prior study.

CONCLUSION: Social workers, social work professional bodies and social work educators need to be proactive in promoting accurate information about social work and what social workers do.

KEYWORDS: social work, public perception.

Introduction

Understanding how social work and social workers are perceived is of interest for many reasons. It has implications for service delivery, education, job satisfaction and retention, and for the confidence of people using and those referring to services.¹

While previous studies have explored perceptions of social workers from various stakeholder positions, to date, no large-scale

studies have explored what social workers believe the public think of them or their profession.

This article reports on findings of an analysis of data from two surveys. The first study (Staniforth, 2014) presented the results of a telephone survey of public perceptions. The findings, which included responses from the participants, indicated that

STANIFORTH, BARBARA, DEANE, KELLEY L. & BELDICE, LIZ (2014) COMPARING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPECTATIONS OF THE PUBLIC VIEW

The Sample

- New Zealand Herald and the Otago Daily Times for the years 2008 to 2012 on the search terms of “social work”, “social worker” and “child youth and family”
- A total of 2258 articles were obtained across all terms in both papers.
- 1512 articles were examined within the data set of “child youth and family”

Data Analysis

- The qualitative analysis of the dataset used a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) for initial review and coding, with a research team member reading over the material and developing codes into an initial coding framework for team discussion and review.
- The coding framework and media dataset was set-up in NVivo™ and items were coded and reviewed.
- A constructionist thematic analysis approach was then used (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where initial codes generated systematically across the dataset were developed and refined into broad ideas or “themes”, showing how media reports “construct” social realities such as social work.

Themes

- Our presentation is limited to crime and abuse
- We are receivers of information and removers of children
- Our “interventions” are related to assessment and risk management and that’s all.
- When things go badly, social workers’ failures are highlighted.

Social workers were seen mainly as *receivers* of referrals and of *removers* of children and placing them in “care”.

Receivers

Receiver role	Illustrative examples
Passive recipients of requests for involvement	<p>CYF to investigate baby death. CYF has been asked to investigate urgently the circumstances surrounding the death of a child who was suffocated by his intoxicated mother. [NZH, May 30, 2012]</p> <p>Drunk mother took son (10) to Dunedin pub. A Dunedin family has been referred to CYF after a woman took her 10-year-old son with her to the pub at 2am on Sunday. [ODT 5/04/2011]</p> <p>They alleged they found bags of P and cannabis – and a 3-year-old girl in the lounge of the house. “Obviously it’s of concern to us that we encounter a wee child in the same location as commercial quantities of drugs and CYF have been notified about what we encountered,” [Sergeant] said. [NZH 20/04/2010]</p> <p>[Newborn abandoned on aircraft] CYF was notified and Immigration officials were checking if correct procedures were followed. [ODT, 19/03/2009]</p>

Removers

Remover role	Illustrative examples
Take away, remove, and “place” children	<p>Both the boy and his three-month-old baby sibling have been removed from the mother’s custody and placed into CYF care. [NZH, ODT 05/10/2012]</p> <p>Homicide probe into woman’s death. CYF were also called to the scene and removed six children and two teenagers. [NZH11/07/2010]</p> <p>The children were taken away by CYF and are now in the care of their step-sister. [NZH,4/11/2012]</p>
Young offenders are removed into “custody” or “secure care”	<p>The 11-year-old and the 12-year-old had been placed in secure care by CYF, he said. [caught with older teens doing burglaries] [NZH,11/04/2012]</p> <p>Firefighters were called to another toilet fire at another public area about 8.30pm, and police found the boy nearby. The arresting officers handed him over to CYF. He would appear in the Family Court in New Plymouth today. [ODT,23/11/2009]</p>

Limited roles

- There was little mention of intervention or treatment other than initial assessment and risk management.
- The primary portrayals of social work and social workers were that they were unidentified operatives who passively received and processed information or tasks, narrowly focused on abuse, violence and crime, in a receiver role.
- There was also a portrayal of a more active remover role, discreetly shifting, placing and removing victims and offenders as required. This could be more visible and somewhat heroic when portrayed as backing up the needs of the wider community to be watchful of, or protected from, known or notorious figures.

Failures

- There were many reports of the ways things went badly in the process, and at those times social workers were at the forefront.
- Shift away from nameless CYF in headlines to “social workers”.
- Headlines bolder

Failures

- *Social workers took four years to take children from a woman accused of beating and neglecting them, despite the pleas and warnings of family and police. [NZH,14/10/2012]*
- *She [the teacher] dealt with at least six CYF workers. “I wanted to scream at these people it was so frustrating”. [NZH,14/062009]*

Custody and care	Illustrative examples
Taken away and “placed” with the wrong people, including family or CYF caregivers:	CYF defends placement of abused children. CYF is defending its decision to place five children whose mother had been convicted of child abuse into the care of a relative who was today sentenced for assaulting three of them. [NZH, 09/11/2010]
Not enough placement options or facilities	In Dunedin, a 16-year-old spent a night last week in a Dunedin Central police station cell because no beds were available in secure youth facilities. [ODT, 18/08/2010]
Too many placements and moves	But at 13 his behaviour began to deteriorate after he was sexually abused by “someone who lived near the family home”. His mother could not handle his behaviour and he was shuffled, he told a court-appointed psychologist, between 57 CYF foster homes over a three-year period. [NZH, 14/062012]

A rare view

- *... the pleasant environment belies the disturbing reality these care-and-protection social workers face daily. The 38-strong team is constantly balancing existing caseloads with urgent incoming work and support for families with children's safety – each decision potentially life-changing. ... But ask why New Zealand's rate of child-abuse cases is so high and there is a long silence. [ODT, 01/042012]*

The CYF content presents a limited view of social work, with potential implications for the scope of social work practice being limited to removal of children, and a reduction in the acknowledgement of the wider scope of treatment and intervention. There is also an emphasis on criticism of social workers when children are the victims of violence that occurs within a wider socio-political context.

The media has influence

- On public
- On funders
- On social policy
- On prospective students

We need good social workers in statutory child and family/whanau work!

Aging workforce

High social worker turnover at MVCOT

Increasing rates of reporting of concerns

For the year 1 July 2015 – 30 June 2016 there

were: 142,249 Reports of Concern to Child

Youth and Family – these include 58,021 Police

Family Violence Referrals.

(<http://www.childmatters.org.nz/55/learn-about-child-abuse/facts>)

Social work registration

- What is a social worker?
- Currently we are negotiating who is a social worker/what is social work in preparation for social work registration.
- Limiting the view of social worker competencies in this environment could have negative long term implications.

We need to push back against “child rescue” mentality

- Social workers need to be seen as capable of a range of interventions other than those required for assessment and risk management.
- We are entering period of trauma informed care. Social work needs to be able to contribute in this environment.
- Creativity and competencies need to be valued.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2003). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2*, 77-101.