

Audio2589865844

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Hello and welcome to Learn on the Go, a podcast from Community Care Inform where we discuss the issues affecting social workers. I'm Ruth Hardy-Mullings, head of content at Community Care, and today we're talking about negative media coverage and blame of social workers, and the impact that this has. Hopefully if you're listening you've heard about Community Care's *Choose Social Work* campaign. We will launch this campaign in June, our first since 2015, as a way to counteract the negative media landscape that surrounds social work. Instead, we want to show the complex, thoughtful, life-changing work that social workers do every single day and inspire future generations to become social workers.

So I'm really pleased that with me today are two expert guests, Dr Liz Frost and Dr Maria Leedham. Thank you both for joining us today. And Liz, please can I ask you to introduce yourself?

Liz Frost:

Yes. Hello. I'm Liz Frost. I'm Dr Liz Frost. I'm at the University of the West of England in Bristol. I've been involved with Ruth in a project that involves finding out with local authorities why people are leaving, essentially. And I got involved in that because my interest, which massively overlaps, is really the wellbeing of social work in child protection and child and family work. So why people are able to stay or how people thrive or some kind of idea like that. Intellectually I got involved with this while I was doing some work on recognition as a way of thinking about how we can be...any of us can be okay. And it seemed to me that particularly shame is almost like the opposite of what we get from recognition. So yes, the primary driver of looking at blame, shame and a hostile environment, if you like, for social work is about how people can go on thriving in these incredibly difficult and pressured jobs with that as a kind of context.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Brilliant. Thank you, Liz. And Maria, could you introduce yourself too?

Maria Leedham:

Hi. I'm Dr Maria Leedham, and I'm a senior lecturer in applied linguistics at the Open University. My background is in, well primarily, initially, language teaching. And then my research is in the way that language is used in texts and writing, and more latterly I've looked at the language surrounding social workers. So I've carried out a project on how social workers are portrayed in the UK national press. So the negative depictions around social work. And I've also looked at portrayals in TV programmes in English language of social workers and other professions that compared them. So I'm not looking at how characters are viewed on TV or the content of the stories. It's the language surrounding the term 'social worker'. Is that a positive depiction, negative, neutral? Hence my interest here.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thank you Maria. And I think it's great to have both your perspectives – Liz from a social work background and now as a professor, and Maria from a linguistic perspective, I think they're an interesting combination! And I'm looking forward to the discussion that we're going to have today.

And Maria, as you touched on then, you've done some research into how social workers are portrayed in UK newspapers as well as on TV. So could you briefly share some of the key findings of the research you've done?

Maria Leedham:

Yeah, sure. So a lot of research has indicated that social workers are portrayed in a very negative way in newspapers, and particularly it seems in the UK social workers get a really raw deal here, I think. And my research in UK newspapers set about to see if this was still the case, and to look at the kind of nature of this negativity.

So I took a snapshot of three months of UK newspapers, and I searched for all the articles mentioning 'social worker'. And this gave me almost 1,000 instances across over 700 articles. And then I looked at each instance. I looked at the language surrounding the term 'social worker' and classified them as positive, negative or neutral. And a lot of the instances are neutral. You know, social worker mentioned in a list of police officers or teachers or just in general. So 70% are neutral. But a full 25% of the mentions of social worker were negative and only 6% positive. So there is definitely negativity there.

And part of this is the kind of bias towards negativity in the news. You know, that's what makes the story. So I looked at the negative instances more closely and grouped them to look at what kind of negativity was shown. And I found that by far the most instances concerned social workers' perceived failure to notice or to act in a ratio of 5:2 between that and over-zealousness. So the kind of child-snatcher image. So it's more about what social workers didn't do or didn't notice than a portrayal of child-snatchers, it seems.

And additionally there seemed to be an interest in social workers' personal lives. So sort of evidence of holding individuals to account with a kind of higher moral standard. So anything that's perceived as not quite right or not quite good enough in their relationship or finance, there's a mention of. "And they're a social worker," as if, you know, they ought to be above the rest of us. So I found that quite interesting.

A further significant finding was that most...by far the majority of the instances were in child protection. So adult care barely gets a look in. It's just not mentioned. Social workers are mentioned in the press when a child is harmed or dies. When a case goes wrong, basically. I mean, that happens in adult care as well, but that's just barely ever mentioned.

So further work I've done, and taking us beyond news reporting, is around how social workers are portrayed in television dramas. So here I looked at Anglophone dramas, so whether it's UK, US,

Australia. In the English language. And it's mainly dramas. A few other children's programmes, *Dr Who* and so on. Anything in the realm of entertainment.

And I found here – and again it's looking at the language surrounding social work, not any visual representation – I found here that social workers were viewed as either bureaucrats or child-snatchers. So a little bit more emphasis on the kind of taking children away. You know, think of the storylines on soap operas that feature that. Social workers were not an integral part of the story. There's rarely a character in a drama or soap opera who is a social worker. They're normally brought in for an episode, do their job and then whipped away again. So we don't see social workers as fully rounded human beings. They're just to move the plotline along. And given that many members of the public have no contact themselves with social workers, people are going by what they read in the papers or see on TV, so that's quite important that this is a very narrow view.

So I looked at the language around social workers and a range of other professions, such as teacher, doctor, therapist, police officer. And interestingly, I found evidence to suggest that social worker characters on TV and those from other female-dominated professions were often referred to in terms of how they look and whether they're available for dating. So it's quite a difficult landscape, I think, for people to work in. And yeah, extremely negative.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

That's really interesting. And yeah, I guess it also ties in maybe to a point you made as well, that a lot of the public don't have any contact with social workers, whereas we've all had contact with teachers or doctors or nurses. There's much more public understanding about those professions, whereas social work, unless you are involved in social work or you've had that direct experience or someone in your family is a social worker, it's really hard to get that first-hand perspective on what the actual social work role is.

Maria Leedham:

It is. And I think in that sense what we read in the papers, what we view on TV and similar programmes, is really important because that's where we're getting our information from. You know, everybody has been taught and been to the doctor and probably talked to a police officer at some point. But we maybe have never talked to a social worker or been involved with one. So we don't know what they do. And if we go by what we see in the media, all they do is in the realm of child protection, where they're either kind of bureaucrats or taking children away from their families. So it's quite a hostile environment for the social workers to work in, I think.

Another point I noticed that I found interesting as a linguist from the TV work is that...so the mention of the social worker are not necessarily where there is an actual social worker in the programme. It's where other people are comparing themselves to social workers. So you might have a police officer saying, 'That's not my job. I'm not a social worker.' You know, so there's this very ring-fenced view of social work as a caring profession and perhaps other people distancing themselves because maybe they don't want to get involved. There's a 'that's not my job' kind of feel to it.

So I found one common pattern of words was, 'I'm a [something], not a social worker.' You know, 'I'm a doctor, not a social worker,' 'I'm a teacher, not a social worker.' So that's not my job. That's for somebody else. I'm not going to get involved. And that the social work role is to get involved, to do the caring, perhaps emotional work, and people are distancing themselves from that. So I think there there's a kind of discourse of caring roles being less highly regarded, which is terrible because, I mean, they're hugely important. The work of social workers is incredibly important to society. And what I would love to see are dramas where social workers are integral characters in the drama and fully rounded and valued, and we see them as proper characters, not as sort of bit-players who come in, take a child away or slap in a form, and then clear off again never to be seen again.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Absolutely. Thank you. And Liz, as you said, we've worked really closely together on research that you've done with Community Care about social worker retention and what enables social workers to thrive in their jobs. So could you talk a bit about blame in relation to social work, and why this is linked to social worker retention?
[0:13:59.2]

Liz Frost:

Yes. So when Community Care – even before Ruth and I were working together – approached me because they knew I was working around how do people stay in child protection. I'd done a piece of work actually with Italy and with Sweden – a pilot piece of work – on how do people remain in these jobs. And so when I linked up with Community Care, who suggested that the local authorities are needing some help with how do you help people stay – in other words, their retention, and indeed wellbeing issues – I did a very informal literature review from a whole different set of sources because issues like wellbeing in social work present themselves in papers on burnout, on stress, on retention. There's a whole range of stuff where you get this.

So I looked at a lot of different kinds of sources for what we already know about how social workers in child protection and child and family work are managing. And we came up with a set of sort of main headings, really thinking about what helps people stay. So we finally drafted categories of what was their support like, did they feel safe, what the organisation issues were that were thrown up, how were they helped to develop as workers, staff development training, those kind of things. And the working context. So particularly around, 'Is it a good team? How's the work-life balance?', all the rest of it.

And we had enough examples from previous research to know that under this section on safety, it wasn't just about whether you were abused or shouted at – which some people are, but remarkably in England less than you'd probably think – but also under safety were issues to do with huge workloads. So, 'Oh my God, is that safe? I haven't managed to get through all of those visits,' or whatever. But also blame and shame as a category. And that linked with the ways in which you might be blamed or shamed, I suppose is the basis of what my writing and thinking around it has been, really.

So in relation to blame and shame, the way we've thought about it is from internal sources – so the way the organisation works with

workers. Do they haul people over the coals if something goes wrong on a case? Is that a kind of pointing the finger issue? Is that a kind of, 'You're going to go through disciplinary procedures,' for example or whatever. And also more subtle things to do with, for example, racism in organisations. So the shaming of being a hated black social worker with a white case and then the organisation's response to that, how seriously these are taken. So those kind of structural inequalities are also built into that.

But the other issue, of course, is exactly what Maria's just been setting out, which is what I would call a hostile context. So the issues of, yes the media response, typified by the whole Sharon Shoesmith episode around Peter Connelly years ago, and the fact that everybody knew her as the villain and very few people managed to read the retractions and the apologies, which were in very small letters and so on, that came when clearly there was no justification for this. But we do like a villain to hang out to dry, and that was where she fitted in.

So more generally the kind of atmosphere Maria's talking about whereby it's extremely difficult to see yourself reflected back as anything other than, well you know, at best useless really. And too liberal and, yeah, kind of like woke young people who kind of can be deceived so easily because they don't really have any common sense kind of approach. From that through to kind of really sort of almost, well metaphorically but almost literally failing to hear the cries of abused children and not acting enough. So that balance of...well it's hanged if you do and hanged if you don't sort of situation, is the way various social workers have expressed it to us over the seven years that we've been interviewing social workers about these issues, including issues of blame and shame, really.

So I think it's very easy now to exist as a sort of paranoid social worker. I don't mean that remotely in a critical sense. There's just enough stuff being thrown at you. So traditionally when we've thought about how can child protection social workers be, and thinking about their psychologies, there are probably sort of two areas really that psychologically make life incredibly hard. There's a lot of contextual ones as well.

So the ones that psychologically make it very hard are the nature of witnessing high risks to children, really. The fact that, you know, you're going into situations where there is fear and anxiety and abuse, and going home with that. Under Covid, of course, doing that in your home mostly, that what you're dealing with is unspeakable, what you're dealing with is what society doesn't really want to know happens, is that some people behave violently and viciously towards their children, who are struggling and suffering. The psychological stuff is that you're tolerating massive levels of kind of...I suppose vicarious trauma. Or just that going home at night thinking, 'Is this alright? Have I done the right thing?' Those kinds of things, really.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, yeah, it really comes through that actually, like you say, social workers can't win. They're either seen as incompetent, Maria you've touched on from your research, that that failure to act or that failure to notice something. Or it's that over-

zealous kind of social worker taking away children when there's no justification and breaking up families. And we never hear about the in between where most of social work happens, where people are working very hard to support people in difficult circumstances

Liz Frost:

And the reality, Ruth, of course, is that they're not acting alone. Multi-disciplinary decisions. There are courts involved in this. There are seniors, there are health visitors, quite often the police, there are doctors. Social workers can't, as you well know but the world prefers not to kind of imagine, social workers don't march in and take children away off their own backs. Of course they don't. We don't live in that kind of world. And I think that's a side of it, the interdisciplinary side of it, which very rarely gets any coverage, that is giving the lie to that idea that they just act on their own, you know, they just go off and do that. It's a kind of...it staggers me that anybody could imagine that we would let anybody have that importance of a decision and kind of only personally, really. So it's just the refusal to acknowledge that these are contextual situations and the insistence that this must be an individual act that I find kind of depressing, I suppose, really.

Maria Leedham:

Definitely, definitely. And I think, it makes everybody else feel better if there's a case of abuse or child death, if we can hold an individual to blame. You know, we can point the finger, 'If that social worker had only listened, if they'd acted sooner, then this terrible thing would not have happened.' And that way, cases of neglect and abuse – largely in children's care – aren't a resourcing issue or a wider societal problem. It's not austerity. It's that individual. If they had acted differently then this wouldn't have happened. And then everyone else can kind of breathe a sigh of relief. It doesn't happen to us, it doesn't happen to the rest of society. We don't need to act. We just need to fix the problem. And that's hugely damaging to social worker morale. It's great that people are still keen to work and enter the profession and are still massively caring, but I think it's a hugely difficult environment to be working within. And we really need the media to be more on board and, while there's the negativity bias, we could do with more stories where things go right, to present a more rounded picture. And I think the entertainment sector could do that too, present a rounded picture of social work as a job that you can enjoy and feel you're doing something worthwhile, instead of just pinpointing these terrible cases.

Liz Frost:

Yes. Not newsworthy, though.

Maria Leedham:

Well, not newsworthy. But could be entertainment-worthy. Why not? We get lots of dramas about police officers and lots of teachers. But very little. We've had Damned and Kiri but very little. And there's certainly no...I don't think there are any soap opera characters where there's an ongoing character who...they're somebody's mum, you know, they pop down to school but they're also a social worker. We don't get that roundedness of a character. They're just bit-players coming in, swooping in, doing their bureaucratic stuff or snatching a child away, and then clearing off and you never see them again.

Liz Frost:

It becomes the sort of demon that sits on your shoulder if you're a social worker. And trying to work well with a sense of being seen to. You know, you must be seen to. As well as do, you must be seen to

be doing, blah, blah, blah. It's a sort of fairly demoralising way of working, really. I mean, this is the thing that the Munro report in 2012, 2014 actually considered, was we don't want social workers in the office filling in paperwork the whole time to demonstrate that they've done this or they're doing this or all of that kind of bureaucratic checking, the kind of 'Let's watch everything very closely.' We want them out there building relationships with people. And of course, building relationships with people is quite hard to do if they start by approaching you as if you're kind of, yeah, basically either malicious or a fool, really. And so that doesn't help. Of course, it's what the majority of social workers spend a lot of their time doing and nobody has any view of, is the fact that they're trying to build relationships with people who are struggling with bringing up their kids and offering whatever support they can with it. And that's what's rarely captured, and that's the reality of people's working life. And getting into kind of rooms with other professionals, and indeed the parents, to work out how best these children and families can be supported. You know, and that's the everyday nuts and bolts of it.

Maria Leedham:

Just we're building a kind of culture of blame and then there's a need to be defensive. There's a lot of defensive writing going on, isn't there? Because if you don't document it, it's as if it didn't happen. 'Well did you make that phone call? What happened? Did you speak to them? Did you refer it? Did you involve other agencies?' It's all got to be logged. And I mean, that's hugely...a huge drain on time when you could be out there visiting, talking to people. Which is what social workers I've talked to...you know, that's what they want to do. That's what they came into the job for, to build relationships and help people. And now the helping is actually mediated through writing. Everything has to be logged and you've got to make the case. You've got to be able to write very persuasively to make the case that your adult, your child that you're helping get the support that they need. Everything comes down to the money, doesn't it? And logged through the writing.

And I think in terms of not being held accountable for if something goes wrong, everything has to be logged. So it's extremely defensive writing there, isn't it? Because if you don't write it down, maybe it didn't happen. Where can we log that to say that it did happen, that you pass it on to somebody else and share that responsibility around...

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

And that's something we hear a lot from social workers, and it comes up in the retention research that we've done as well, about that disconnect, I guess, with having to spend so much time on paperwork and working with bureaucratic systems and not on the direct work with children and families, which is why people love the profession and what people want to do. But actually, that case recording just becomes so onerous that it can swallow up a huge amount of time, and yeah, that's been something that's consistently been a real source of discontent for social workers since we've been doing this research and in multiple pieces of research that we've done with our audience about issues in current social work practice.

And actually, we've talked a lot about child protection in particular and children's social work, and we've probably answered this a bit

already, but is it less of a problem, is negative media coverage less of a problem in adult social work? Does that come up at all or is it very firmly focused on child protection? I think Maria, you said from your research it is almost entirely child protection.

Maria Leedham:

Yeah, definitely. If you only knew about social work from the media you would think that there were no social workers working with adults. It's all around children, and particularly child protection, and particularly where there's a case of abuse or death. So where there's a problem and things go wrong, that's when social workers are in the news, when a child is injured or dies, and then there's this culture, this blame and shame culture, of looking for an individual person or individual agency to be held accountable. And inevitably where there's a serious case review, often the writing is held up as lacking. 'If only this had been logged, if only this had been referred earlier, there'd been a stronger case made. The writing wasn't persuasive enough to have the child taken away earlier,' you know, and it's all down to the social worker didn't act quickly enough. And that makes, as I said before, everybody else feel a lot better because it's not a societal issue, it's an individual.

But definitely firmly within child protection as far as I'm able to see.

Liz Frost:

Occasionally something comes up around mental health, doesn't it? Social worker in mental health. But of course with mental health, because the world assumes that's the 'health' bit of that is the leading term in that term, actually of course it tends to be seen more as the hospital's issue.

And the things that I see on the TV or read about in relation to adults are where there has been gross abuse or malpractice within residential settings. And so in care homes and so on, where the workers who've been recorded working with adults with learning disabilities or with old people tend also to be pinned as monsters, and the context isn't so much looked at. But I only live just up the road from a very high-profile home that was closed down actually on the basis of, I think, a BBC2 enquiry. But the social work element of that wasn't really particularly pinpointed.

Maria Leedham:

No. It's care workers in the home, isn't it? And the care home manager. So again, it's an individual's held accountable, to blame. Mm. Not a resourcing issue or a, 'We don't care enough about our old people,' issue. Or during the pandemic, you know, 'Let's discharge people from hospital. They can go back to their care home. It's the care home's problem.' It's sort of pushing vulnerable people in society from pillar to post really, isn't it?

Liz Frost:

Yes.

Maria Leedham:

'It's not my problem. They're over there. They're not with me.'

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Towards the end of our conversation Liz and Maria also spoke about how the pandemic has changed how social workers work, and the impact this has on the support you get from your team.

Maria Leedham:

But also with social work I think the move to hot-desking and to working from home, working from a shed in the garden, from your

front room, I mean, then work is ever-present. You're not just seeing it but also you've lost that camaraderie. 'Cause when I observed social workers in a project around their writing, we watched and observed the kind of context in which they were writing, you know, in the car, at home, at work. We didn't go to their home, just the work bit. But the camaraderie around just being able to call out kind of, 'Oh, anyone know about this? Can anyone help me with that?' and getting an immediate response, and the emotional support if you'd got a difficult phone call, it was hugely important. I mean, they were really...I was shocked by how noisy the open-plan offices were, compared to I was used to an open-plan, large, large office at the Open University in Milton Keynes. But it's very quiet. People have a phone call, they leave the room. They pop in a meeting room to take the phone call. It's all really, really quiet. The social work offices I went to were just hugely noisy. But so incredibly supportive. And I could see how much that was needed. You need to vent sometimes and you need somebody to say, 'You did a good job there.'

Liz Frost:

Oh, completely. And that shows up so much in this research that Ruth and I have been involved in. It really, really does. You know, there are about twenty different categories that we ask people around, one of which is, 'Tell us about your team,' or, 'What's the team like?' or however my, you know, qualitative interview phrases it. And also we phrase it on paper. And almost all of the work we've done people have gone, 'Yes, that's brilliant. We help each other. Sometimes we go to the pub with each other but work with each other.' The kind of enthusiasm for, and appreciation of...sometimes you can do the whole of these surveys and you'll go, 'What about safety?' 'Oh yeah, we tend to look after each other. You know, we give each other phone calls.' 'What about emotional support?' 'Oh yeah, somebody comes in looking sad, we cart them off to the crying room and make a cup of tea and listen to them.' You know, 'What about kind of development?' 'Yeah, we tell each other about courses and so on.' 'What about the working context?' 'Yeah, the team's brilliant, blah, blah, blah.' And it's the team, the team, the team, the team, the team. It comes over as such a huge strength. And of course, Covid did do some damage to that. And it's not finished with, you know? Still when...I mean, we were talking to managers in social services last autumn. There's still places where people are only in a day a week or two days a week, teams that haven't yet insisted on a shared day so this can all start rebuilding again. You know, it depends really how much the management are prepared to take responsibility for rebuilding a team. And as you say, things like hot-desking, reorganisations, lots of different things of standardisation and so on, really you know, make actually forming or reforming these things where people get so much support then. So it really isn't going to help people. Because of course you always do feel more anxious about being blamed, about who's looking at you and so on on your own.

Maria Leedham:

Yes.

Liz Frost:

It's very, very different on your own.

Maria Leedham:

You need to offload. You need that immediate emotional support. It can't wait until next week when you've got a supervision or Friday when you're in the office.

Liz Frost: Absolutely.

Maria Leedham: You know, you need it there and then when you made the phone call. You just need that five minutes of, 'Did I do okay? Could I have handled it differently? What else can I do?' Just somebody to give you a hug. You can't do that over Teams or Zoom, you know?

Ruth Hardy-Mullings: That's very true. And I feel like we could keep talking about this for ages, but we're reaching the end of our time. And I wanted to end on a positive note of anything you think is changing or improving?

Maria Leedham: Yeah, I have something. While there is a great deal of negativity in the press, I think recently there have been some really good initiatives to encourage a broader range of news interest in social work. And I'm thinking here of the BASW social work journalism awards that were held in July 2023 for the first time and are going to be repeated annually. And I think there we had a lot of press coverage. There were awards given across six categories. So that's really a push towards a positive representation and a more rounded representation of the work that social workers do.

And also the SWU guidelines in media reporting in social work. So how to more reasonably present social workers in the press in a rounded way and not holding individuals accountable and not the kind of hostile environment.

So I think those two things that are working together are very positive for the future. So I'm hopeful.

Liz Frost: I think I'm rather hoping that the context in which people's work might change in about a year, and we may have an end to the austerity that creates a context in which not everything can be done. There are risks about, some things have to not be done. Local authorities can't cover everything that needs to be done. And of course that's always going to put blame and shame in the picture if the expectations of society as to what can be done and the resources to get that done don't match up. I think perhaps we'll have a different kind of focus on child poverty and so on that actually stresses families out. Of course poverty stresses families out, even more and make these situations more likely. You know, Sure Start was the product, wasn't it, of a different kind of thinking to what we've rather got used to in the last decade and a half, produced a lowering of the levels of child abuse and children coming to care and so on. So that context might change.

And I think teaching social workers we're more focused on how can they be alright. You know, what things do they need? How to ask for the kind of support that they need to be able to feel emotionally safe in the job. And that perhaps the tone of society, which in many ways has been entirely conducive to the criticisms that we've discussed also has in it some kind of acceptance that anxiety is a thing, that actually people go through lives and experience anxiety and that that's a thing in the workplace, and that actually we need to take seriously as a generation of new young people and say, 'You need to take this seriously, the anxiety that people feel,' and that would include in relation to blame and shame. 'What are we all going to do about it?'

So I think it might move, given particularly what Maria's just said. And some of the shifts that we might expect in a sort of broader context.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thank you. That's been a really interesting and wide-ranging conversation and I've really enjoyed it. And I think it would be remiss of me not to mention that two journalists at Community Care actually won awards at the BASW SW Journalism Awards, which we were very proud of.

And I just wanted to give another shoutout for our *Choose Social Work* campaign on communitycare.co.uk. We've got a huge range of content and some really positive stories as well about the brilliant work that social workers do. We've also got a really interesting interview with Sharon Shoesmith, who we've mentioned today. And we've also got another Learn on the Go podcast episode with Dan, who's an eighteen-year-old who's care-experienced about his experiences of social work and why he supports the campaign, which I'd really recommend listening to.

So yeah, thank you again Maria and Liz, and we hope that everyone listening has enjoyed this episode.