

SOCIAL WORKER PERCEPTIONS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF THE PROFESSION IN THE NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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This exploratory study describes social workers' perceptions of the depiction of the social work profession found in the news and entertainment media. A random sample of 665 MSW social workers who were members of the Florida Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers were surveyed regarding how they felt the profession was depicted in the news and entertainment media on a set of paired adjectives comprising 9 semantic differential scales. Findings showed that these social workers perceived the profession to be depicted negatively in both news and entertainment media. Implications for social work educators are discussed.

IN RECENT YEARS, social workers have been featured on prime time television shows such as *Judging Amy* and *Norm* that display the extremes of the mass media portrait of social workers. The ABC sitcom, *Norm* (now in reruns), featuring a "social worker" as the central character, began airing in the spring of 1999. This sitcom instigated immediate reaction among professional social workers. Social work Web sites were electrified with comments, most highly negative, about this portrayal of a social worker ("Members Say," 1999). The character Norm, as portrayed in the sitcom, was presented as a hockey player who

worked as a "social worker" in a form of community service for conviction of tax fraud. He was given the choice of going to jail or becoming a "social worker." Many professional social workers were outraged at the mockery of the profession created by this sitcom.

On the positive end of the media portrait of social workers, the series *Judging Amy*, also debuted in 1999 on CBS and featured a child welfare worker as a main character. In this program, the social worker portrayed many of the qualities endorsed by the social work profession such as compassion and integrity. This series presented a more positive depiction of

social workers to the public and has been praised and supported by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (Tower, 2000).

The social work profession has long been concerned with how it is portrayed in the media (Franklin & Parton, 1991; Gabor, 1990; McGowan & Walsh, 2000). The social work profession should indeed be concerned with its portrayal in the media as retention, funding, and recruitment have been shown to be influenced by the media. Research studies in the United Kingdom (UK) reveal that the constant criticism and misrepresentation of social services demoralizes social workers (Franklin, 1998). In a survey of 3,000 social work professionals in the United Kingdom, 92% thought that staff morale was damaged by the way the media reports on social care ("Social Workers Wary," 2005). In addition, media representation of the social work profession has an impact on the conduct and professional practice of social work and influences the public esteem in which social workers are held. By informing and influencing the mood of public opinion, media representation ultimately affects social policy concerning social services, social workers, and their clients (Franklin, 1998). In general, media coverage often influences the prioritizing of resources within social service agencies most often in favor of child protection services to the comparative neglect of other social concerns (Franklin, 1998). Avoiding becoming the next case highlighted on the front page of the newspaper can be a powerful influence on the provision of social services.

Of particular concern to social work educators is the media's influence on recruitment

of social work students. Jennifer Bernard of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work attributes the fall in number of social work students in the United Kingdom in part to social work's poor image ("As Drop in Social Work Students Accelerates," 1998). Further, 80% of 3,000 social workers surveyed by Community Care in 2005 thought that recruitment and retention of staff in the UK was exacerbated by the way the media reports on social care ("Social Workers Wary," 2005).

A positive image is important to the vitality and effectiveness of the social work profession (Reid & Misener, 2001), especially in light of studies which have shown that most people do not engage in personal contact with professional social workers. A 1981 survey of 994 people within Great Britain (Weir, 1981) found that 29% of the sample had come into contact with a social worker. Of these 29% the contacts occurred in the following forms: work (26%), voluntary work (8%), going to see a social worker (19%), social worker visited them (35%), or social worker visited an acquaintance (6%). An additional study conducted by the Camden Social Services Department (located in the United Kingdom) during 1988 revealed that only 2% of the population ever met a social worker (Morris, 1988). Therefore, the other 70–98% of the population in the United Kingdom relies on what they read in newspapers, see on television, and hear by word of mouth for their information and opinions about social services (Franklin, 1998). As the functions and the roles of social workers in the United Kingdom and the United States are similar, UK data implies that the majority of US citizens will also not have

direct contact with a social worker. As a result, the relationship between the media and social work cannot be ignored.

Media Depictions of the Social Work Profession

Limited research is available regarding the relationship between the profession of social work and the media. Much of the available research focuses on how the *public* views social work (Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane, 1978; Kaufman & Raymond, 1996; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Reid & Misener, 2001), not on how social work professionals view their media portrayal. It has long been believed within the social work profession that social workers are inaccurately depicted in both the news and entertainment media. According to Josephine Nieves (1997), former executive director of NASW, "Little troubles professional social workers more than the less-than-accurate image the public seems to have of our profession, acquired unfairly and based on misinformation" (p. 2).

In an effort to substantiate this belief, NASW commissioned a series of focus groups to explore the relationship between social workers, the general public, and the media ("Perceptions of Profession," 2004). The research was conducted in March 2004, using eight focus groups held in Anaheim, CA, Atlanta, GA, and Baltimore, MD. Six of the focus groups were composed of members of the general public; three groups were made up of people age 25–49 and three of people age 50–76. The remaining two focus groups were conducted using social workers as participants. Findings from the focus groups with members of the general public revealed that

"Most participants had not had direct experience with social workers, and that the general public's knowledge about and image of social workers are shaped primarily through the media, through both news and entertainment ("Perceptions of Profession," 2004, p.8). Other findings include that "News stories about child welfare play a prominent role in shaping the image of social workers, social work is strongly identified with the government, and social workers work primarily with the poor, the less privileged, or those without access to other resources (some believe that people with greater resources would look to psychologists, psychiatrists, or family physicians to help solve their problems)" ("Perceptions of Profession," 2004, p. 8). In addition, the research also showed that attitudes among the general public toward social workers was very positive on the whole, despite the public's awareness of negative stories about child welfare cases. Findings from the focus groups conducted with social workers revealed these social workers believe the profession's public image is negative and that the public has a misperception about the profession ("Perceptions of Profession," 2004).

As stated previously, social workers' perception of how the profession is depicted in the media is related to the recruitment of future social workers to the profession. "Social work students have often expressed concern with their professional image, especially as portrayed by the media, via television, film, and print. The prevailing view frequently voiced by students, as well as educators and practitioners, is that we are typically featured in unflattering, negative terms such as child snatchers, ineffective do-gooders,

fuzzy-thinking liberals, parasites on the public purse, and self-serving bureaucrats" (Davenport & Davenport, 1997, p. 11). Social work practitioners and educators have a duty to inform the public about social issues as well as to debunk myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it (Tower, 2000). Moreover, practitioners and educators are responsible for teaching students to shape the public image of social work through effective use of popular media rather than relying on people outside of the profession to portray it fairly (Tower, 2000).

It has been argued that there is reason for social workers to be concerned about their image because depictions in shows like *Norm* epitomize the massive public misunderstanding about who social workers are and what they do (Gibelman, 2000). In an effort to better understand the relationship between the profession of social work and the media, the research presented in this article empirically explores the perception held by social workers, of the media image of the social work profession.

Literature Review

The belief that the social work profession gets unusually poor news media treatment is described as common among social workers in Britain (Aldridge, 1990). According to Aldridge (1994), the management and staff of British social service agencies are convinced that their portrayal in the news media—particularly the press—is uniquely poor among occupations, although the evidence for this belief is far from conclusive. Aldridge (1994) concedes that social work press is not uni-

formly negative, and that positive coverage of social work does occur, especially in local media. Regardless of the circumscribed coverage of social work, the discussion of the news media "problem" is a recurring theme in the British social work press. A British professional magazine, *Community Care*, interviewed social service staff in 1989 and found that 90% thought that the public's attitude toward social work was the same or worse than it had been 3 years before. Study findings revealed that of those maintaining that social work's standing had declined, 93% blamed the press (Aldridge, 1990).

There has been more study of the media content regarding the image of social work in the United Kingdom than in the United States (Aldridge, 1990; Franklin, 1998; Franklin & Parton, 1991). In one of the earliest studies, Franklin (1998) analyzed nearly 2,000 news stories from nine national newspapers in the United Kingdom, published between July 1997 and June 1998, that addressed social services and social work. Franklin classified each report as expressing attitudes toward social services and social work as "beneficial," "factual," or "adverse." Reports were classified as "beneficial" if they actively supported or endorsed social services; "factual" if they neither actively supported nor criticized social services; and "adverse" if they actively criticized social work or social services. Franklin (1998) found that 64% of the tabloid newspaper coverage was adverse and 49.1% of the broadsheet newspaper coverage was adverse. He concluded that "newspaper reporting of social work and social services is overwhelmingly negative and critical" (p. 5).

In the United States, Davenport and Davenport (1997) used a convenience sample over a 6-month period in 1992 to conduct a content analysis of different sources of media, examining the number of times social work or social workers were mentioned. These authors reviewed seven state, local, or national newspapers (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Columbia Tribune*); several news/business magazines (e.g., *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*); "Women's" magazines (e.g., *Redbook*, *McCall's*, *Cosmopolitan*), "Men's" magazines (e.g., *Esquire*, *GQ*); and watched a "fair amount" of television, especially news programs, documentaries, political talk shows, and regular talk shows such as Oprah and Montel Williams. The authors found social work or social workers were mentioned 130 times and 86% were positive. Social workers were seen as doing a good job, viewed as experts, or quoted because of their professional status. They found that 3.8% were negative (i.e., social workers made a mistake, were unethical, etc.), and 3.1% were neutral (i.e., social worker used in obituary), and 6.9% were questionable (i.e., could have been seen as positive or negative depending on the perception of the reader/viewer/listener).

Two years later, Davenport and Davenport (1997) replicated their earlier study for a 6-month period from 1994 to 1995, and found that social work or social workers were mentioned 191 times. Consistent with their previous study, the authors found that the overwhelming majority of references to social work were still positive, although the percentage dropped from 86% to 74%. Negative com-

ments remained around 4%, but questionable ones increased from around 7% to 13%, while neutral comments increased from around 3% to around 9%. Unfortunately, story prominence was not reported, so it was not known if negative stories, though fewer in number, were more likely to be lead or front-page news. As a result of these findings, the authors concluded that overall, the news and entertainment media depict a positive portrayal of the profession. They concluded that most of the negative and questionable remarks came from conservative politicians and writers who dislike social workers because they dislike a major role for government in society. They posit that the profession of social work will probably never be loved by everyone because of partisan philosophical differences on the role of government involvement in social services. Findings from this study are however, limited by the unscientific sampling methodology, lack of rigorous coding procedures, and lack of information concerning reliability (Reid & Misener, 2001).

Reid and Misener (2001) conducted a more rigorous, scientific cross-national study of the image of social work in newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom. Using the LEXIS-NEXIS database of full text articles, a sample of 20 weeks was randomly drawn from 60 major newspapers over a 4-1/2-year period. The authors found 399 articles that made reference to social work. Of these, ratings of the image of social work were more positive in the United States than in the United Kingdom. In both countries, stories about child welfare were found to be more negative than any other area of practice.

Positive images of the profession were more likely to be found in articles where social workers were portrayed as experts, presenting program innovations, or depicted as carrying out interesting practice activities.

More recently, Freeman and Valentine (2004) investigated the image of the social work profession portrayed in film. Their findings, from an analysis of 44 movies from 1938 to 1998, demonstrated that in nearly all cases the depiction of the profession was negative. "If people believe what they see in the movies, social workers are mostly women, mostly White, middle-class, heterosexual; they mostly work in child welfare, are likely to be incompetent, have a tendency to engage in sexual relationships with clients, mostly work with people living in poverty, and mostly function to maintain the societal status quo" (Freeman & Valentine, 2004, p. 159).

Overall, existing literature indicates that the social work profession in the United States is depicted negatively in the entertainment media and more favorably in the news media. No information is available regarding negative versus positive story prominence or placement. More significantly, the views of social workers about the media's portrait of their profession remain largely unknown. Ironically, while the general public has been surveyed regarding their view of the profession of social work, social workers themselves (in the United States) have not been asked about their perception of the media image of the profession. In an effort to better describe the perceptual state of social workers regarding their media image; this research explores social workers' perceptions of the profession in both the news and entertainment media. As

exemplified by the polarized positive and negative images of social work represented in *Norm* and *Judging Amy*, it is of interest to determine how practicing social workers perceive their media portrait.

Method

In the fall of 1999, a survey was mailed to a stratified random sample of 1,500 members from the Florida Chapter of NASW. The survey packet included a Florida NASW cover letter, a self-addressed stamped postcard, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. The self-addressed post card contained the members' names and addresses. When returned, the card was used to ascertain which members had returned the survey and which did not. Because a second, follow-up mailing was to be used, members were asked to return the postcard separately in order to maintain survey anonymity and to prevent these members from being sent a second survey. For the first mailing, 1,500 surveys were sent out and 548 usable surveys were returned (36.5%). A second mailing was sent out to the remaining 936 members who had not returned postcards. For the second mailing, 267 surveys were returned (28.5%) for a total final response rate of 54.3% ($N=815$). The general purpose of the survey was to obtain career and salary information of the Florida NASW members. Because the research was focused on practicing mainstream social workers, of the 815 usable returned surveys, 665 respondents with an MSW were selected and herein examined.

The survey instrument included nine items employing semantic differential scales. These items were used to obtain information regarding respondents' opinions on how

social workers are portrayed in both the entertainment and news media. Nine pairs of adjectives were given and the respondents were asked to rank them on a scale of 1 to 5 according to their perception of the depiction of social workers in the *entertainment* media (For example from effective, to ineffective where 1=effective, and 5=ineffective). Next, this same pair of adjectives was given again but this time the respondents were asked to rank them in a similar manner according to their perception of the depiction of social workers in the *news* media. The format of the survey question is available in the Appendix.

Results

Demographically, the study sample compared well with the national NASW membership as described by Gibelman and Schervich (1997). These authors found that the median age of NASW members was between 41 and 45 years, including BSW members who tend to be younger. In the present study, the mean age of respondents was 47 years. Additionally, nearly 20% ($n=128$) of the research participants were male, while 80% ($n=531$) were female (six participants did not identify gender). Gibelman and Schervich found that nationally, women comprise 78.30% of the membership. Eighty-five percent ($n=562$) of study participants were Caucasian, which is consistent with the national statistics that reveal 88.50% of the membership is White. The mean income for study participants was \$42,889 compared to 38% of the national MSW membership who earned \$30,000 to \$39,999; and 31.50% who earned \$40,000 or more. The mean years of experience since first social work degree for the sample was 14 years.

Social Worker Perceptions of Media Portraits of Social Work

Examining first the individual adjective scales, the average for each of the nine scales is reported in Table 1 for the news and entertainment media. Lower average scores reflect that the respondents perceived the media as presenting social work in a more positive light or as portraying social workers as more possessing the positive characteristics listed. Higher scores reflect respondent perceptions of the media as showing social workers negatively and as displaying the negative traits listed on the right of the scales.

The first observation, supported by the item average scores greater than 3.0, is that the participants were inclined to rate both the news and entertainment media as showing more negative than positive portrayals of the profession. This was indicated by the prevalence of mean scores exceeding 3.0 and reflects a negative perception of the media's portrait on associated traits. Only two items had positive average mean scores. Both the entertainment and news media were perceived by the MSW respondents as portraying social workers as slightly more normal and caring than as abnormal and uncaring.

Exemplifying this tendency toward perceiving negativity in their profession's portrayal in the entertainment media is the distribution of responses to the "effective-ineffective" scale item. This dimension is perceived by these social workers as the characteristic shown the worst of all the individual items. The most frequent response was 4 with most (58.1%, $n=360$) of the participants indicating a more ineffective entertainment media portrait. Conversely less

than 2% ($n=11$) credited the entertainment media as absolutely portraying social workers as effective. At the other perceptual end, the characteristic that is seen as portrayed most positively in the entertainment media is caring. The entertainment media is perceived by respondents as showing social workers to be more caring than uncaring. The modal response was 2 (41.9%, $n=264$) with more than half (57.8%, $n=364$) scoring entertainment's image on this dimension as a 1 or 2. Just 3.2% ($n=20$) scored the entertainment media a 5 on this item, believing the media to show social workers as absolutely uncaring. In total, on only two characteristics were respondents collectively likely to perceive social workers as positively portrayed in the media. The bulk of the individual measures averages fell on the negative half of the scales.

Overall perceptions of entertainment and news portrayals of social work were further explored via a news and entertainment perception scale constructed from the 9 differential items. The reliability of the resultant scale was good (9-item scale, Cronbach's $\alpha=.8984$ for the entertainment items, $.8963$ for the news items). The scales' alpha values reflect the general agreement of the MSW respondents regarding the news and entertainment media's portrayals of social work across the nine dimensions. The overall entertainment media perception scale reported at the bottom of Table 1 balances near the neutral point (3.0), slightly tilted toward the negative (a small majority, 55.6%, $n=352$, of respondents scored greater than 3.0 on the cumulative scale). Further examination of the individual-item broad standard deviation values (see Table 1)

TABLE 1. MSW Social Worker Perceptions of Social Work Depiction in News and Entertainment Media

Scale Adjectives	<i>n</i>	Entertainment Media		News Media		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Effective/ineffective	620	3.63	1.01	3.57	1.01	1.18	.237
Normal/deviant	611	2.92	.88	2.86	.82	1.56	.120
Positive/negative	612	3.19	1.01	3.26	.92	-1.61	.108
Intelligent/unintelligent	612	3.13	.93	3.19	.87	-1.57	.117
Strong/weak	614	3.23	.95	3.31	.83	-2.25	.025*
Caring/uncaring	616	2.48	1.03	2.80	1.04	-8.20	.000**
Interesting/boring	612	3.29	.95	3.31	.81	-0.43	.670
Trained/untrained	619	3.35	1.03	3.44	.98	-2.18	.029*
Professional/unprofessional	617	3.31	1.02	3.38	1.04	-1.66	.097
<i>Media Perception Scale</i>	622	3.15	.73	3.22	.74	-2.52	.012*

Note. Paired adjectives were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5 with lower scores indicative of a more favorable perception. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$.

revealed substantial variation in social workers' perceptions of the overall entertainment media's portrait. While a majority see the entertainment media image as negative, it is not a vast majority, and there exists a wide range of perceptions among social workers of their entertainment media portrait.

Turning to the perception of the news media's portrait of social work, the individual dimension receiving the most positive assessment by respondents—as with the entertainment media—was the characteristic caring—uncaring. One third of the respondents scored the news media a 2 on this item and 42.7% ($n=264$) resided on the positive side of the scale. Just 5.1% ($n=32$) saw the news media portrait of social workers as totally uncaring. At the other end of the perceptual assessment of the news media, MSW respondents see the news portrait of effective versus ineffective the most negatively: 58.2% ($n=361$) of respondents saw the news image as ineffective and nearly 1 out of 5 (18.3%) saw it as totally ineffective, scoring the news media as a 5 on this item. Overall, the perceptual assessment of the news media unavoidably shifts toward the midpoint from this extreme but remains on the negative assessment side with a scale average of 3.22 (see Table 1). A total of 58.7% ($n=366$) of the social workers scored the news media greater than 3.0 on the collective news media perception scale.

Demographic Differences

How social workers who see the media as more positively presenting their profession differ from those who see the media as presenting less positive images was explored. An examination of the correlations between the demo-

graphic characteristics of age, length of work experience as a social worker, and income, revealed few distinguishing differences. There was a significant, positive relationship between age and caring/uncaring with regard to the entertainment media ($r=.069$, $p<.05$, $n=626$). The older a social worker was, the more likely they were to perceive the profession depicted as uncaring. Regarding length of experience as a social worker, only the perception of the entertainment media's portrayal of social workers as strong versus weak was related. Respondents with more work experience were slightly more likely to see the entertainment media as showing their profession as weak ($r=.098$, $p<.05$, $n=610$). Finally, social workers with higher-than-average incomes were more likely to perceive the entertainment media as showing the profession as more caring than uncaring ($r=-.094$, $p<.05$, $n=511$).

There were no differences along any of the nine individual dimensions or the overall media perception scale for ethnicity (measured as White or non-White). Differences between male and female social workers emerged as the demographic trait with the greatest number of differences (See Table 2). An independent samples *t* test revealed that while both males and females perceived the news media as showing social workers as more negative than positive, females ($M=3.33$, $SD=.93$, $n=505$) perceived the portrayal as significantly more negative than males ($M=3.04$, $SD=.91$, $n=119$), ($t(180)=-3.08$, $p<.01$). Males ($M=2.57$, $SD=1.04$, $n=120$) were more likely than females ($M=2.86$, $SD=1.03$, $n=504$) to perceive that the profession is depicted as more caring in the news media ($t(622)=-2.74$, $p<.01$). Additionally, both males and females

perceived the news media's portrayal of the profession as more untrained, however females ($M=3.50$, $SD=.98$, $n=503$) perceived the portrayal to be significantly more untrained than males ($M=3.23$, $SD=.98$, $n=120$), ($t(621)=2.71$, $p<.01$). Finally, male social workers ($M=2.30$, $SD=.93$, $n=123$) were more likely to credit the entertainment media as presenting a generally more caring portrait of the

social work profession ($t(622)=-2.15$, $p<.05$) than female social workers ($M=2.52$, $SD=1.04$, $n=501$). In essence, only in the areas of the portrayal of social workers as caring versus uncaring, trained and untrained, and generally positive and negative was there a substantial hint of demographic differences limited to gender. Two conclusions suggest themselves. Males tended to be slightly less critical of the

Table 2. Comparison of Male and Female MSW Social Worker Perceptions of News and Entertainment Media Portrayal of the Social Work Profession

Adjectives	Male		Female		df	t
	M	SD	M	SD		
News Media						
Effective/ineffective	3.47	.98	3.61	1.01	626	-1.41
Normal/deviant	2.83	.83	2.87	.82	619	-.465
Positive/negative	3.04	.91	3.33	.93	180	-3.08**
Intelligent/unintelligent	3.07	.86	3.24	.88	620	-1.92
Strong/weak	3.22	.83	3.34	.83	617	-1.32
Caring/uncaring	2.57	1.04	2.86	1.03	622	-2.74**
Interesting/uninteresting	3.27	.87	3.31	.80	617	-.480
Trained/untrained	3.23	.98	3.50	.98	621	2.71**
Professional/unprofessional	3.23	1.04	3.43	1.02	620	-1.84
Entertainment Media						
Effective/ineffective	3.56	1.00	3.64	1.01	623	-.691
Normal/deviant	2.88	.95	2.93	.87	615	-.528
Positive/negative	3.08	1.02	3.23	1.01	616	-1.42
Intelligent/unintelligent	3.08	.99	3.1e	.91	619	-.676
Strong/weak	3.28	.97	3.20	.95	622	.822
Caring/uncaring	2.30	.93	2.52	1.04	622	-2.15*
Interesting/uninteresting	3.18	.99	3.30	.93	618	-1.31
Trained/untrained	3.36	.98	3.35	1.04	623	.069
Professional/unprofessional	3.34	1.05	3.30	1.01	621	.377

Note. Paired adjectives were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5 with lower scores indicative of a more favorable perception. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$.

media; and the portrait of social workers as uncaring appears to be a particularly sensitive issue. Overall, however, as indicated by the lack of relationship with the news and entertainment media perception scales and the relatively weak correlations that were significant, regardless of their differences in experience, age, income, or gender, social workers were more similar than different with regard to their views of the portrayal of the profession in the media.

Entertainment and News Media Comparison

The overall means of 3.15 (entertainment) and 3.22 (news) reflects a tendency of the media to be seen as projecting a more negative than positive image of social work. These means also establish an overall perception of the profession as slightly but statistically significantly better in the entertainment media than in the news media. Although not of great magnitude, the overall respondent perception is that the news media show a poorer image of social work than the images projected by entertainment media. Additionally, three of the nine adjective dimensions, weak-strong, caring-uncaring, and trained-untrained, were seen as significantly different between the entertainment and news.

Weak versus strong. When the social worker's perceptions of the entertainment and news media were compared, with regard to being depicted as strong or weak in the entertainment media and in the news media, there was a statistically significant difference between the means. Social workers perceived themselves as depicted as slightly stronger in the entertainment media than in the news

media. The mean scores greater than 3.0, however, reflect that respondents see both media genres as portraying social workers as more weak than strong. These social workers see themselves as portrayed badly in both media realms, more so in the news media realm.

Caring versus uncaring. Regarding being depicted as being caring or uncaring in the entertainment media versus the news media, there also was a statistically significant difference between the means. It is on this dimension that the greatest difference regarding the two media realms is observed. While both news and entertainment media are thought to show social workers as more caring than uncaring, it is in the entertainment media that respondents felt social workers were best portrayed. The news media is seen as doing well on this characteristic but not as well as the entertainment media.

Trained versus untrained. There was also a slight but statistically significant difference between MSW perceptions of their depiction in the entertainment media and the news media concerning being trained or untrained. Similar to the perception of strong versus weak, these social workers perceived themselves depicted as a bit more trained in the entertainment media than in the news media. In sum, regarding differences in the perception of the news and entertainment media, statistically significant differences were found in one third of the individual characteristics examined and in the overall media perception scales. Where the MSW respondents did see differences, the entertainment media was perceived as presenting a more positive image.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that a slight majority of social workers in this study perceive themselves to be depicted negatively in both the news and entertainment media, more negatively in the news media than in the entertainment media. Two relationships were consistent for both the news and entertainment media. The more income a social worker earned, the more likely he or she was to perceive their profession depicted as more caring in both the entertainment and news media. Female social workers were more likely than male social workers to perceive that the social work profession is depicted as uncaring in both the news and entertainment media. While these and other statistically significant relationships were found in the analysis, all of them were weak relationships and should be interpreted as such. Additional, more detailed research should be conducted to determine if these relationships have any epistemological value. It is clear, however, that more often than not, social workers in this study perceive that their profession is depicted negatively in the media with news media depictions being the most common source of negative portraits.

Limitations of this exploratory study include the sample of social workers surveyed. All of the social workers sampled were members of the Florida Chapter of NASW. Their perceptions of the depiction of the social work profession may not reflect the perceptions of Florida social workers who are not members of Florida NASW, or the perceptions of social workers outside of the state of Florida. Future research should be conducted

with social workers from other regions of the country to determine if there are varying perceptions of media portrayals. These perceptions are also based on views of 1999 media and whether social work views of contemporary media are similar would require replication.

In contemporary society, the media have a crucial role in forming and shaping public opinion. Media make available to people aspects of social reality, which they do not experience directly and thereby make elements of social life generally "knowable." This is particularly significant for an activity like social work of which, unlike teaching or doctoring, most people have little direct experience (Franklin & Parton, 1991). Because the profession of social work is somewhat difficult to define and the public has little to no personal knowledge of the field of social work, the public creates its perceptions with the help of images portrayed of it by outside sources, such as news and entertainment media. The social construction of social work reality is thus formed with the aid of these undeniably influential sources. As the public views news and entertainment media concerning social work, the public forms their perceptions of what social work entails and who social workers are. The public sees not what may be the true reality of social work but the reality presented by media sources, and the media's reality may only serve to show the image they wish to portray and not competing images. The images from which the public acquires knowledge of social work alter the perceptions of such work to either positive or negative extremes. These extremes are the constructions of reality that the public ac-

quires. Images the media portray of social work serve to formulate the perception of those who have no direct contact with the profession. There are few content analysis studies of how the social work profession is actually shown in the media. The perception of media content by MSW respondents in this study is that it is more negative than positive. Whether or not this is an accurate assessment of the media is not known. The few content analysis studies of the media image of social work that are available are contradictory (Aldridge, 1990; Davenport and Davenport, 1997; Franklin, 1998; Franklin & Parton, 1991). If, as social workers believe, the media images of social workers are depicted as more negative than positive, the public most likely would not become aware of it, as they are likely to have little real world contact with professional social workers (Morris, 1988; Weir, 1981). Whether this speculated possibility is a real concern must await additional research. More importantly, however, the media also reach social workers, and exposure to negative images of their work can have adverse effects on professional recruitment, funding, self-image, morale, and work performance.

Conclusion

It is important for the future of the social work profession for social workers to imprint a more positive image of itself on the public, as it is the public that holds the power of benefaction for the profession. If individuals in need of social work services have negative images of the social work profession, this perception may make it more difficult for social workers to engage and serve these clients. Social work, as a profession, seems to have

historically relied on a reactive strategy—allowing the media to create its media image and then reacting to that image. What is recommended is that the profession develop a more proactive media strategy and work to ensure that profession-enhancing content is available. In the age of infotainment, the well-educated social worker has to be both client and media aware. To not promote itself in the media is to run the risk of becoming stereotyped and irrelevant. It is of utmost importance for the profession of social work to improve its image in the news and entertainment media as these images are thought to affect public support for programs, service utilization, worker morale, and its ability to attract and retain new professionals (Kauffman & Raymond, 1996).

Since 1999 the number of both BSW and MSW students has been steadily declining (Joyner, 2005). The influence of the media portrayal of the social work profession on enrollment is largely unknown. However, social worker perception of the depiction of the social work profession in the popular media should be a cause for concern by social work educators. For social work educators, knowledge of how practicing social workers perceive the media depiction of the profession can be helpful in recruiting students and educating them with regard to the media.

If social work educators are committed to having a positive impact on the way the profession is depicted in the media, there are many actions that could be taken to address the problem. "If the goal of social work education is to prepare effective practitioners, researchers, and policy makers, it could be argued that current instructional approaches

are neglecting to teach students crucial skills needed to promote a healthy and just society" (Tower, 2000, p. 585). Suggestions are to either develop a separate "Social Work and the Media" course (see Tower, 2000) or to infuse social work curricula with content on the use of various forms of media within core practice and policy courses. Social work educators need to help students understand the structures, practices, and motivations behind various media if social workers hope to reshape attitudes and increase public knowledge of the profession (Tower, 2000). It is critical for social workers to first understand the profession of journalism and to develop an appreciation for deadline pressures and other news media constraints. Social work educators need to facilitate the development of essential skills such as the ability to communicate clearly in interviews with journalists, ability to draft a press release, ability to identify when a press conference might be an effective promotional device, and the ability to achieve all of the aforementioned without using annoying professional jargon (Neate & Philpot, as cited in Franklin, 1998). Educators also need to teach students how to use the media to promote local programs and issues as well as the profession itself. Students should be exposed in the classroom via role-playing course assignments to a variety of situations and mediums. Exercises as simple as writing letters to the editor, mock interviews for local radio programs, creating public service announcements, or generating footage for local television news stories, would all be beneficial activities to facilitate the development of media skills for social work students.

Further, as social work educators, we

need to seize each opportunity to educate not only our students, but ourselves, our families, our communities, and the media about what it is that social workers actually *do*. We first need to work toward greater clarity among ourselves about exactly who we are, what we do, and why and how we do it (Freeman & Valentine, 2004). Developing a clearer picture of ourselves will help us to begin to inform others about the education, ethics, duties, roles, and responsibilities that guide the practice of professional social work. In our role as social work educators, we have prepared and committed ourselves to education—who is better prepared to educate the public and the media about the profession of social work?

We need to continually work to enhance our public image and the NASW is in a prime position to provide leadership in this area. NASW has launched a public education campaign in early 2005. NASW plans to conduct a multi-year national media campaign to promote social work to the general public and to renew a sense of pride in the social work profession ("Image Drive," 2004). The campaign will include public service announcements, a consumer Web site, direct marketing, special events, paid advertising, press conferences, op-ed articles, and other means of reaching the public to make the profession of social work more accessible ("Perceptions of Profession," 2004). This is an excellent start, but it is not enough. As social work educators, it is our responsibility to assume an active role in the effort to clarify what it is that social workers do. Former NASW president Gary Bailey said it best, "We've spent years helping others, but we don't help ourselves. Our image is portrayed by the media and it has not

always been favorable. The time has come for us to tell our own story, with one voice. To tell the story of social work" ("Image Drive," 2004, p. 10).

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APPENDIX. Format of Survey Question Used to Measure Social Worker Perception of Media Portrayals of Social Work Professionals

“How do you feel social workers are depicted in the [entertainment/news] media?”

Effective	1	2	3	4	5	Ineffective
Normal	1	2	3	4	5	Deviant
Positive	1	2	3	4	5	Negative
Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	Unintelligent
Strong	1	2	3	4	5	Weak
Caring	1	2	3	4	5	Uncaring
Interesting	1	2	3	4	5	Boring
Trained	1	2	3	4	5	Untrained
Professional	1	2	3	4	5	Unprofessional

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