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THE IMAGE OF CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE NEWS AND AMONGST CHILDREN'S PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

This research examines portrayals of child protection social workers in New Zealand news reporting and explores how child protection social workers are perceived by their colleagues in the children's workforce. The research set out not only to assess perceptions, but also to gain insight into how they are formed and to consider their implications. To this end, the research also examined children's professionals' perceptions of news coverage and sought to better understand the factors that influence professionals' attitudes towards child protection social workers. Finally, professionals from the children's workforce were asked how helpful they believed referrals to child protection social workers would be for a range of problems.

The study is positioned within a critical realist outlook and uses mixed methodology. The data was sourced using two instruments. Firstly, professionals from the children's workforce in New Zealand were invited to participate in an online survey. Secondly, two years of New Zealand news articles were analysed to assess how child protection social workers were portrayed.

The principle findings of the research have been presented as they relate to five research questions. They underscore the importance of personal and professional relationships, and of academic and professional publications, in influencing children's professionals' perceptions of child protection social workers. They suggest children's professionals tend to view child protection social workers somewhat favourably. On the other hand, news reporting was found to depict child protection social workers more negatively, although only marginally so. Children's professionals appear to largely understand this.

Alongside the more encouraging findings, negative perceptions of specific characteristics of child protection social workers were found to prevail in both news reporting and amongst children's professionals. Perhaps of most concern, the findings identified a troubling lack of confidence in the potential helpfulness of referrals to child protection social workers. An analysis of these findings and themes from the literature indicates that the key perceptions of concern are unlikely to be divorced from substantive issues. Improving the image of child protection social workers in New Zealand will almost certainly require addressing some of the underlying causes of unfavourable perceptions.

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This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named in this document is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Research Aims	2
The researchers' interest in the topic.....	2
The environment in which the research was conducted.....	3
Definition of key terms	5
Thesis Structure	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review	9
The Image of Social Work.....	9
Social workers' perceptions of how the profession is perceived	12
Perceptions of social workers amongst professionals	13
Portrayals of social workers in the media	15
Why do portrayals and perceptions of social workers matter?.....	19
Chapter Summary	23
Chapter 3: Methodology	25
Research questions	25
Epistemology	25
Mixed Methodology	26
Data Collection	27
Limitations of the methodology	38
Ethical Considerations	39
Chapter Summary	41
Chapter 4: Results.....	42
Survey Respondents	42

What influences do children’s professionals think are important in forming their views about child protection social workers?	44
How do children’s professionals think child protection social workers are depicted in news reporting?	47
How are child protection social workers depicted in news reporting?	50
How do children’s professionals perceive child protection social workers?.....	57
Relationships between portrayals in news reporting and the views of children’s professionals.....	61
What types of problems do children’s professionals think child protection social workers are helpful in resolving?	65
Chapter Summary	66
Chapter 5: Discussion	68
What influences do children’s professionals think are important in forming their views about child protection social workers?	68
How do children’s professionals think child protection social workers are depicted in news reporting?	72
How are child protection social workers depicted in news reporting?	73
How do children’s professionals perceive child protection social workers?.....	80
What types of problems do children’s professionals think child protection social workers are helpful in resolving?	86
Chapter Summary	89
Chapter 6: Conclusion	92
Methodology	92
Summary of Principal Findings	92
Research Implications and Recommendations	97
Limitations of the research.....	104
Concluding Remarks	105
References.....	107

Appendix A - Key findings from the literature	115
Appendix B - Online survey	123
Appendix C - Invitation to participate in the online survey (long version)	133
Appendix D - Invitation to participate in the survey (short version).....	136
Appendix E - Sources of news articles	137
Appendix F - News articles dataset.....	138
Appendix G - Database entry form	143
Appendix H - Content analysis guide	145
Appendix I - Notification of low risk research form	147
Appendix J - Email acknowledging low risk ethics notification	153
Appendix K - Content analysis coding to assess net favourability	155
Appendix L - Survey data coding to assess net favourability.....	156
Appendix M - Survey data showing distinction between strong and moderate opinions	157
Appendix N - Comparisons of media portrayals and views of participants by characteristic	160

TABLES AND FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 - Key media themes about social workers identified by the literature ..	28
Table 2 – Mode of invitation used to reach participants.....	31
Table 3 - Coding schema used for the content analysis of news articles	36
Table 4 - Opportunities for future research	102
Table 5 - Summary of key findings from the literature.....	115
Table 6 - News sources accessed in the Newztext database search	137
Table 7 - List of news articles assessed in the content analysis.....	138
Table 8 - Content analysis codes and affiliations for favourability assessment of articles	155
Table 9 - Alignment of survey responses to positive and negative values for favourability assessment	156

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Online Survey Structure.....	28
Figure 2 - Demographics of Survey Respondents	43
Figure 3 - Importance of factors that influenced participant views of child protection social workers	44
Figure 4 - Importance of news as influencing factor by age group	45
Figure 5 - Importance of professional experience as influencing factor by age group	46
Figure 6 - Distinctions between professions on the importance placed on factors influencing their opinion about child protection social workers	47
Figure 7 - How children's professionals believe child protection social workers are portrayed in news reporting	49
Figure 8 - Favourability of portrayals of child protection social workers.....	51
Figure 9 - News coverage by interest area	52
Figure 10 - Count of articles that portrayed child protection social workers by characteristics	54
Figure 11 – Characterisation of child protection social workers in news reporting by interest area	56
Figure 12 - How professionals in the children's workforce view child protection social workers	59
Figure 13 - Responses to 'Are they competent?' by professional group	61
Figure 14 - Are they concerned about the wellbeing of the families they are working with?.....	62
Figure 15 - Are they competent?	63

Figure 16 - Do they take the views of children and young people they are working with seriously?	64
Figure 17 - Are they trustworthy?	64
Figure 18 - Are they helpful?.....	65
Figure 19 - Perceptions of helpfulness of referrals to a child protection social worker for different types of problems.....	66
Figure 20 - The views of members of the public and children's professionals in New Zealand compared	82
Figure 21 - How professionals in the children's workforce believe child protection social workers are portrayed in news reporting	157
Figure 22 - How professionals in the children's workforce view child protection social workers	158
Figure 23 - Perceptions of helpfulness of referrals to a child protection social worker for different types of problems.....	159